Postcards *from the* Middle East

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For Susanna, Sam, Chloe, and Josh

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Acknowledgments

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My greatest thanks go to the people of Lebanon for taking us into their hearts and changing us for good.

A Note on Transliteration of Arabic to English Text

Recording Arabic words in Roman script is fraught with challenges, the greatest of which is consistency. Let me give you an example. The region of Aammiq that looms large in the central chapters of the book is variously recorded on maps, road signs, reports and in literature as Aammiq, Ammiq, Amiq, Amik, Ameek and even 9amiq!

In an attempt to remain consistent and give the reader a chance to sound out the words I have attempted to stick to two simple rules:

1. The transliteration is phonetic but does not make use of special symbols for sounds which have no English equivalent. Thus the Islamic holy text is written "Qur'an" not "Ḳur'ān".

2. Where Arabic names have wide use in English I opt for the English form that is in most common use, even if it is not the best transliteration – e.g. Bekaa Valley.

A note on names

The stories and incidents in the book have been recorded as accurately as my memory allowed. However, a few of the names of people and places have been changed to maintain anonymity where that is important.

To Picnic or Not to Picnic?

Summer, 1995
Aammiq wetland, the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

It was time to explore. We had arrived in the Bekaa valley a month ago but, without a car, had only got to know the village and a taste of the surrounding countryside. The panorama of fertile plain abruptly interrupted by the towering, dusty heights of the Anti-Lebanon hills, with Mount Hermon brooding to the south, invited us further in.

Now we had a car. And we were off.

This was not our first Arab country. Susanna and I had lived in Kuwait immediately (and I mean immediately) before the first Gulf War. After that year, and a time of putting our lives together in the UK after the war, we had returned to the region – first living the highs and lows, joys and pain of learning Arabic in Jordan. Now we were in the Lebanon. This was not going to be a short adventure, either – we were intending to stay. But all that was on our minds that particular morning was getting the kids in the car, packing a picnic and heading into the scenery that had so tantalized us from our balcony eyrie perched at the top of the town of Qab Elias.

We headed south. Leaving the narrow, congested streets, swerving round the donkey grazing on the rubbish spilling out of the dry riverbed, we left the dust, the noise and the colour of

our adopted neighbourhood, and drove into the cool green of the irrigated fields that made up the West Bekaa. Neighbours, fast becoming friends, had told us of a local picnic spot that was safe. Abu Ali had been very insistent on where we should go. He had patiently listened to our plans for exploring, our desire to head into the foothills of the mountains to the east, to find tracks to follow into the woods on the plain, or perhaps even reach the top of the Barouk ridge to the west. He simply said, "No! *Gayr amena*!" It is not safe!

Mines and unexploded ordinance still littered the countryside. The chessboard fields had played host to local militias and invading armies over the past three decades. The front line stand-off between the Israelis and Syrians in the 1980s was just a few miles to the south of the town. We had provisionally earmarked some of the most likely spots, from poring over our local map, but riverbanks or ridges with the promise of panoramic views produced dire warnings of maimings from Abu Ali: "Don't you love your children? Why would you take them to such a place?" Eventually our probing questions elicited the directions to a local beauty spot that was considered safe – if we felt we had to explore, even though it was far too hot and there really wasn't much to see, and we must be careful of the snakes… and we were off.

It was clear by the number of cars parked on the verge by the roadside that many of our fellow villagers did not share Abu Ali's pessimism but were enjoying family and food by the delphinium-blue pools fed from the aquifer deep under the mountain immediately behind us. Whole families had taken up residence under the few remaining trees by the water's edge. Vast tablecloths were spread with fruit, flat bread, salads, marinating meat, pastries and countless Tupperware containers cradling unknown delicacies. Women enrobed against the sun and prying eyes were flapping and strutting around the growing feasts like the Great White Egrets in the marshland beyond the pools. Men reclined in semi-circles of

camp chairs, taking it in turns to draw deep lungfuls of smoke from the *nargile* pipes topped with glowing tobacco.

Running between the culinary islands the children laughed, played and fought, a riot of noise and energy disturbing the practised aim of the young men who were trying to shoot water snakes, as they crisscrossed the pools in search of small fish. Occasional retorts pinpointed the more serious hunters deep in the wetland reed beds, away from the disturbance of their kin, after the larger game of herons, storks or, if they were really lucky, a buzzard or eagle to stuff and mount as a trophy back home.

We stood motionless, appalled, by the car. What were we going to do?

Our own children impatiently tugged on our arms, urging us on to join the party. They wanted to play in the water. It was too hot to stand by the road.

"Let's go down there!" said four-year-old Sam, pointing to the drama unfolding by the pool.

It was not the image we had longed for during the month we had been stuck in the noisy, busy, crowded town. Here we were, finally in the "countryside" but the town had beaten us to it! Susanna and I had arrived, complete with our British expectations of what a picnic spot should be, and we were sorely disappointed. But we had not come to Lebanon for picnics, we had come to get to know and understand the local people, the Lebanese, the Arabs and from that understanding share our faith. A faith first lived out just on the other side of the mountain overlooking this beautiful but noisy marsh. And so we joined the picnic.

To the pulsating drumbeat of the Derbakeh – the classic Lebanese hand-held drum – we made our way through the shaded feasts laid out on the grass, entreated by family after family: "*Mayilu*! *Mayilu*! Join us! Join us!"

Choosing a vacant spot near one of the more insistent families, we settled down to unpack our embarrassingly small picnic. It didn't matter. We were soon proffered succulent chicken, perfectly

cooked on recycled tin barbeques, steaming and wrapped in flat bread. Our plates were piled high with *tabbouleh* and *fattoush* salads, *kibbe* meatballs with fresh goat's milk yoghurt, stuffed vine leaves and *homous*, as the al fresco mezze went on and on. The children were soon the centre of attention of a crowd of adoring adults and Susanna was being quizzed, principally on whom we were related to in the valley. Questions were fired from several directions at once:

"You are the foreigners living in *Bayt Kassis*, the apartment above the eEvangelical School, aren't you?"

"Is it true you have come from London? It is always foggy in London, isn't it?"

"Who are your family in Lebanon?"

"Do you really not have any family in the country? But how awful!"

"What is your family name? Naylor – but that's a girl's name – you can't be called Naylor!"

At this point a rather shy teenager was pushed to the front, her hijab pulled tightly round her lower face to conceal braces, the mark of teenagers the world over. "This is Nayla!"

Our local identity could never be in our extended family, but in common with all parents in the valley we were known in relation to our children – or to be more precise, with reference to our son; so we became Um and Abu Sami (mother and father of Sam). Our two-year-old daughter, Chloe, didn't get a look-in.

"Really? No Lebanese family? How dreadful to be on your own…" I drifted off in the direction of the lads who were trying to kill the snakes.

"Do you want a go?" asked the nearest marksman.

"No, thanks. I like snakes and I don't want to kill a harmless creature that is not doing me any harm," I replied.

"He sounds like Yusef!" called a tall, immaculately dressed boy, as he threw his Coke bottle into the nearby pool. "He likes snakes; he likes all sorts of creepy animals."

I decided I need to meet Yusef and so, after explaining that I was going to be the new science teacher at the large secondary school in the valley (which seemed to explain my weird views on animal life), I was escorted by a gaggle of boys and young men into the wetland proper, on the trail of Yusef. These lads knew the paths that crisscrossed the drier parts of the reed bed and hidden meadows that took us deeper into the marshes, away from the sound of traffic and picnickers, into a still world, muffled by the curtains of reeds, sun-bleached, dry feathery heads craning upwards to the cornflower blue of the sky.

Initially we brought our own noise with us, raucous and shrill as the entourage enjoyed the energy of the pack, sending water rails scurrying into the undergrowth. Purple Herons, breaking cover at the last minute in an explosion of wings, lifted their elongated frames clear of the reeds. But soon the magic of the place took hold and a hush descended on the group. We followed paths made by wild creatures, boar and maybe hyena or swamp cats – away from the road with its apron of grass playing host to the village party – into an oasis of peace, untouched by humankind.

"Stop!" shouted Abdallah, our self-appointed leader, pointing to the lopsided fence with its lonely wire draped around the rough corner of the field, nestled on two sides by the dog-leg of a tiny river.

"*Al Gaam*! Mines!"

Not so untouched by humankind after all. As if to mark the counterpoint of realities, a sonic boom detonated overhead with a second close on its heels – Israeli jets, breaking the sound barrier on their return home. Sure enough, arcing vapour trails pinpointed the interruption as Lebanon's neighbour flexed its military muscle, just in case anyone forgot they controlled the sky. A daily event, it did little more than cause a slight pause in conversation, but the wetland erupted as great flocks of ducks and waders exploded from the hidden pools. Soon they were swirling in decreasing circles, the tiny forms of the waders coming to ground first, the ducks, harried by hunters, struggling to find a safe landing.

I was bombarded with emotion. In the glorious peace and wildness of this place, with the sun on our backs and the majesty of the eastern mountains marching their way to the Syrian Desert beyond, I had been enjoying the company of an infectiously enthusiastic band of lads in a sanctuary of rare natural beauty. A few more steps and one or more of us would have been blown up.

I was also struggling to make sense of the attitudes I had encountered amongst the Lebanese youth around me. They clearly loved this place – but, from my very British perspective, they diminished it with their litter, noise and random hunting. Was this typical Lebanese behaviour? Was it part of the culture, or did attitudes vary here as much as they did back home? Was there a Lebanese view on hunting, nature, noise… anything? Did the Lebanese view their surroundings like other Arabs? Was there an Arab way of looking at the world?

These questions are issues of identity, and as I write on this topic I feel that I am back in that minefield in the marsh. I am sure I will put a step wrong and I will get blown up. But it is important territory to map out. In many ways this book is an attempt to make patterns and connections from our experiences as a British family living in the Arab world, to better understand it and its people.

Talking about the Arab world is a good place to start, although the definition in Wikipedia hints of trouble to come when it states: "No universally accepted definition of 'the Arab world' exists, but it is generally assumed to include the twenty-two countries belonging to the Arab League that have a combined population of about 280 million..."[1]

Treading even more gingerly, let's try to go a step further in the minefield without dire consequences – who, then, is an Arab?

Feeling vulnerable and so seeking confidence in the academic kudos of the Oxford dictionary, we find: "a member of a Semitic people, originally from the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring territories, inhabiting much of the Middle East and North Africa."[2]

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_world (accessed 3.11.14).
[2] http://oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/Arab (accessed 3.11.14).

And so we step on a mine. Yusef, whom we eventually found in the wetland, would not have wanted to classify himself as having forebears from the Arabian Peninsula. He was proud of his Phoenician roots, but he would describe himself as an Arab. Several of his family members liked to draw the distinction between their Phoenician identity and the Arabs who came from Syria with their flocks, much as Bedouin wanderers have for millennia. And let's not get started with religion. It is a common misconception in the West that Arabs are Muslim. Six million Coptic Christians in Egypt and the very constitution of the state of Lebanon dismantle that simplification.

Perhaps language will help – for many outsiders it is the litmus test of defining an Arab, but many of our new friends and neighbours were multilingual. The huge Arab diaspora has meant that many from an "Arab background" are more comfortable in French, English or, in the case of the Lebanese, Brazilian Portuguese, than they are in Arabic.

So what of my hope of writing about a Lebanese or an Arab perspective? There is no more an "Arab way of being" than there is a "European way of being". Italians and Danes may both be European but culturally they are very different. Although we lived in the region for a long time, we only lived in the particular Arab communities described in this book and so can only offer insights into their specific Arab stories. Nevertheless I hope, by following our journey, you will see through our slowly opening eyes something of the wealth of the culture and the depths of the struggles that are part of the tapestry of the Arab world.

Had we only known it, that picnic, in the first few weeks of our lives in the Bekaa, was a foretaste of so much to come. During our years spent in the Arab world, living, working, laughing and crying with neighbours and colleagues, many of whom became friends, we started to see things from a new perspective. We remained very firmly British (at least, I did; Susanna, a third culture kid herself, never was very British and the children are a completely different

story), but we started to feel, to respond, as our Arab friends did. It happened erratically and was often frustrating and awkward. We frequently got angry and were, sometimes, very difficult neighbours to be with as we got it wrong, as we misunderstood, yet again. But slowly our perspectives changed and, as they did so, we started to see why our Arab neighbours did things that way, thought the way they did, valued the things they valued. As we lived embedded within an Arab context, the things we initially saw as foreign, "other", or even wrong, started, firstly, to make sense and soon were thoroughly normal.

So many themes were wrapped up with the *khubz*, the Arabic bread, with its delicious chicken at the picnic. We had encountered extraordinary hospitality, and hospitality with joy. There was clearly an obligation to share the food, particularly with the foreigners who didn't bring enough to eat, but there was also an infectious curiosity in one another that came with that sharing. There was an extended family cohesion that was a delight to see and become a part of as our very young children were accepted and immediately valued – just for being children. There were also strong views that were very directly communicated.

Susanna should not have dressed Samuel in such a light shirt; he was too young not to have a sweater (even though it was 30 degrees C in the shade)! What was she thinking?

Several things struck us about this exchange, as we debriefed on our conversations in the car on the way home. Firstly it was only directed at Susanna – clearly, as the man I would have nothing to do with dressing the children. Secondly, the children of the mothers who said this had long since discarded their own sweaters. But perhaps, most forcibly, everything we were told was said with such complete conviction. We soon learned to listen carefully to what was being said but to basically ignore the strength of the conviction behind the words, as whenever anyone told us anything it was said as if it had just been dictated by the Almighty himself.

And what about the human disturbance of the wildlife sanctuary of the marshes, the killing of the reptiles, the shooting of the storks, and the near-ubiquitous hunting? That is a theme I will return to in earnest, but it needs a chapter of its own.

Chapter 1

The Middle East and Back Again

1989–90
Kuwait and Iraq

Newly married, we nervously looked round the airport departure lounge for other likely teachers. Sure enough, it didn't take us long to spot and confirm others waiting to board the flight who had signed up to teach at one of the many international schools in Kuwait. It was immediately reassuring, after the briefest exchange of stories, to connect with other young couples, very much like us, heading off into the foreign and unfamiliar. The reasons were common currency: for adventure, to leave behind the mounting classroom bureaucracy, to experience a new culture and, of course, to earn a tax-free salary. In our case, we had an added dimension, and that was to trial a life abroad to see if we, and particularly I, were cut out for it long-term.

Susanna had grown up a child of missionaries – in Ghana, Mexico and the United States; living in England was her challenge. My upbringing had been very different. I had spent my first nineteen years in Kent, followed by university and teacher training. I had no experience of living cross-culturally. We had talked to many ex-patriates and they told a common story of a sense of

dislocation as they learned to adapt to life in a new country. Until they adjusted, they lived with the default settings and expectations of their home culture which were constantly challenged by a very different set of norms.

But that was our plan – in "Christian speak", we felt a calling to long-term cross-cultural service, to work as Christians where the church needed us most. We hadn't really planned to do that in Kuwait – although we were open to exploring possibilities – but we were very deliberately setting out to see if we could make a life abroad as a first step to exploring how and where we would spend our future.

From our current perspective, it seems extraordinary that we felt the need to try out living abroad in such a cautious and experimental way. The truth is, however, that the thought of the heat, the distance from family and lack of cultural certainties were deeply troubling, and I just did not know how I would respond

The plane touched down late at night into thick fog. It was like Heathrow on a bleak November evening. On leaving the plane the reality struck us – we had walked into the steam room at a sauna. Relief came in the form of the air-conditioned, sparkling terminal building. The self-identified group of teachers were corralled through the immigration desks – staffed by white-robed young Kuwaiti men, each sporting a near-identical and neatly trimmed moustache, their red-and-white checked headdress casually flicked over a shoulder. They seemed bored and little interested in our passports – the paperwork the school minder provided did its job and we were stamped, processed and allowed into the emirate. The fate of a string of dispirited Bangladeshis was less clear. In contrast to the indolence of our treatment, they were receiving the full force of official wrath as their papers were clearly amiss. Grateful for our nationality but tired, we filed out of the airport and watched transfixed as the glittering coastal strip slid past, smeared as it was through the condensation on the air-conditioned minibus windows. Final destination for the night, and home for the next eleven

months, was a neat but basic flat in an eleven-storey apartment block, overlooking a roundabout, in crowded Kuwait City.

In the first few days and weeks of cross-cultural living, the differentness seem profound. This is alternately exciting and unnerving. What appears, only a few short weeks later, as mundane takes on huge significance as new ways of living are explored and compared with the familiarity of home. In the earliest stages, the inevitable contrasts are nearly universally in favour of home. This was my first cross-cultural living, and comparing the neat streets of Oxford with our new, scruffy urban Gulf Arab neighbourhood confirmed the rule. In midday temperatures of 50+ degrees C, rubbish locked in cages on street corners (to stop the army of mangy feral cats scavenging) stank. The crumbling but newly built apartment blocks groaned under the relentless sun, the pavements were not so much cracked as pot-holed and litter-strewn, and the urban landscape was haphazard. But this was only half the story. Exotic scents filled the air, fine art flapped on the breeze as exquisite carpets were aired and early morning light brought colours to life in a way I had never experienced back home. It was not just the light that accentuated colour. After the flattening heat of the day, our neighbours emerged, a riot of races and nationalities: Kuwaitis for sure, but also Armenian, Bangladeshi, Circassian – right through the alphabet to Zambians. They brought into the neon of evening a promenade of humanity in all its noisy, scented, vibrant diversity.

The oil wells of the Arabian Gulf are black holes in more ways than one. Like their celestial counterparts, they have a powerful centripetal effect on the surrounding nations and further afield. All the nationalities and ethnicities of the Middle East are to be found in the oil sheikdoms: Arabs from North Africa and the Levant; Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Syrians, Palestinians and Lebanese, but also Berbers from the Atlas Mountains, Turks from Anatolia, Persians from Iran, Kurds from Northern Iraq and Syria, and Armenians scattered by the Ottomans. Bringing with them their heritage, our block of flats and neighbourhood read like

a *Who's Who* of ancient religious creeds. Certainly the two great confessions of Islam, Sunni and Shia, were well represented, but there were also Sufi and Alawite and more obscure Muslim groups, such as the Ibadi, in the form of the few Omanis living nearby.

When it came to the Middle East Christian communities, you really needed to know your church history to be able to make head or tail of the competing claims to orthodoxy. Making the Reformation seem like a recent falling out, we met Assyrian Christians who looked back to the Council of Ephesus as the great parting of the ways in AD 431, or the Syriac, Coptic or Armenian Orthodox whose schism came in AD 451 with the Council of Chalcedon and its decree on the nature of Christ. But perhaps the most surprising of all were the living fossils in this ancient sea; the Mandeans of southern Iraq and Iran, followers of John the Baptist but not of Jesus.

Our apartment block was one of the tallest in the neighbourhood and so commanded views over the pancake roofs, deserted lots and tangles of wire and road to the sea on three sides. The block only afforded views for those willing to climb onto the flat roof, however. As we soon discovered, views from the apartments, in common with many Arab buildings, were sacrificed for privacy. Windows were small and obscured, reluctant concessions bringing limited light into the concrete cocoons protecting the families within from the harshness of the sun and prying eyes.

Veiled as it was, Kuwait City's coast was its redemption from urban ugliness. We travelled daily along this ochre shoreline as we commuted the five miles or so of the main arterial highway to a more upmarket and largely residential district. Looming above the detached white stone villas rose the school, a huge white cube, gleaming in the intense sunshine.

For young British teachers, schooled in a child-centred educational philosophy, the school was a set of contradictions. Profit competed with professionalism across the timetable. Small classes of motivated students were occasionally compromised by

blatant nepotism, and staff expertise varied from excellent to the barely legal. In the official literature of the school, it described itself as being modelled on the best English public schools, providing a UK-compatible education for far-flung British expats and a host of nationalities keen to buy into an educational gold standard. GCSEs and A-levels were the traded commodity and most students achieved the grades required by their aspirational parents. Just six weeks previously I had been teaching in an excellent comprehensive school in north Oxford and the academic provision at the new school did not come close. However, as a teacher, the experience was wholly enjoyable. No longer battling with attention-deficit classes, there were ranks of delightful young Indians, Arabs and Europeans who would imbibe information as the sand in the playground would devour the rare raindrops that fell in winter.

As the academic year progressed and the searing summer heat was replaced by a delightful autumn and chilly winter, occasional educational storms would sweep through the classrooms, bringing into stark relief the contradictions at the heart of the school. The most memorable was triggered by the humble school blazer. Technically part of the school uniform but never enforced, these superfluous additions to school dress drew the ire of the older students and some parents when an edict was received from the administration that within a week, they would cloak all pupil shoulders. They were on sale from the uniform shop for the price of fifty Kuwait dinars (around £100 sterling). Leading the rebellion were the (few) British and other European students who pointed out that outside air-conditioned classrooms, the temperatures were still hotter than any northern summer and the cheap nylon material was a health hazard in the Kuwaiti climate. Early boycotts enraged the school owner who had taken delivery of a huge stock and was keen to turn a fast profit through his captive customers. Along with the other senior year tutors, a new routine was added to my day – blazer check. We had to pass on the names of all those in our tutor groups who were still blazerless, while keeping a careful check on

an increasing number of counterfeit blazers, pirate items cheaply copied in the souk, to the alarm of the school owners.

Attitudes to the school administration were mixed at the best of times but Blazergate revealed the cultural differences which, ironically, were one of the strengths of the school. The petitions and boycott gave a focus for the resentment that many of the

European teenagers felt towards the conservative conformist culture enveloping them. The Indian and other Asians were much less concerned and saw it as both an inevitable imposition and distraction from the serious business of learning. The Arab students – expatriate and Kuwaiti – formed a continuum between these two extremes. Their position mostly depended on how much the fifty KD would hurt their family finances. Whatever the student perspective, within a few short weeks, all pupils had a blazer. Independent learning was one thing, but independent thought was not encouraged.

When not checking up on uniform, the mechanics of my teaching role was near-identical to work in England, with the huge exception of time. Small classes and frequent free periods meant that staff could often be found in the teachers' lounge drinking coffee. A few staff would be enjoying the Irish contingent's blue jokes with their snacks even while tiny A-level sets grafted unsupervised. This was all in stark contrast to the life of the primary staff –Susanna included. With classroom teachers only getting a break when there were specialist music sessions, the life of a teacher of infants was a very busy one.

Whereas my introduction to teaching abroad had been a relative holiday, Susanna really earned her money. As well as the heavier workload, she had a very difficult line manager. A veteran of Kuwait, this manager had bullied her way through many of the English schools and was in a powerful position in her own elementary kingdom. Professionally she was stale, but financially she was committed to stay in tax-free exile, despite long since having fallen out of love with her adopted country. An all-too-

common combination, it made for toxic management and Susanna, as the youngest member of staff, experienced her worst excesses.

As the victimization showed no signs of abating, we took advice from more experienced staff and hatched a plan. Normal mechanisms for staff complaint were non-existent and it was clear that staff support was dished out on the basis of favouritism. We got to know the influential senior staff, and when I let it be known that we were thinking of leaving as Susanna was experiencing such harsh treatment from her line manager, the news found its way to the top. A sideways move meant that Susanna suddenly had a superb supervisor in the form of our very good friend Marianne.

We had not realized at the time but we were playing a high-stakes game, as defections by the staff and instant dismissal were common events. At the end of each holiday, there would be notable absences as certain teachers failed to return from travels overseas. They had quietly sorted out their affairs and got out of contractual obligations mid-term by simply leaving the country. The reasons behind these staff disappearances became clear whenever a teacher was in dispute with the school. The only disputes possible with the administration were appeal against immediate dismissal – the usual sanction if your face did not fit. One teacher took the school to court under the extensive Kuwaiti labour laws, only to be greeted by the judge and school owner enjoying a coffee together when he arrived early for the hearing. He was on the next plane out of the emirate.

As the academic year turned, we were frustrated with our lack of engagement with the Kuwaiti culture around us. We enjoyed friendships within the expatriate social circle of school, connected as it was to other networks. However, one of our motivations for life outside the UK was to see another culture from the inside. And that meant getting to know and share our lives with our neighbours, not just our work colleagues who were transplants like us. With no Arabic and busy working lives (at least, in Susanna's case), this was harder than we thought. We did meet Kuwaiti parents, but engagement was tightly defined by professional protocols and the

Kuwaitis we knew in this context seemed intensely private and happy to keep relationships on an "upstairs downstairs" basis.

It was church that gave us the social space to meet and truly get to know a representative cross-section of the residents of the nation. Although conspicuous by their absence, the conservative Muslim Kuwaitis were a minority in their own land and the evangelical church that we attended more truly represented the ethnic melting pot that made up the workforce of the state. There were over twenty congregations that met in the downtown church compound – a relic of earlier days when medical missionaries provided the only hospital care for an impoverished nation of pearl fishers.

Our congregation, defined by English, was one of the big four, and here we got to know fellow believers from ancient churches in Goa, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, as well as those from the Philippines, Europe, North and South America.

So many of our new friends had extraordinary stories. We became friends with three sisters from Bethlehem, without passports, born in Kuwait, the eldest studying to be a doctor but with no right of travel outside the cubic borders of the tiny desert emirate. There were Armenians, whose ancient lands had been confiscated by the Ottomans – itinerant craftsmen whose ancestors had wandered the Arab world with nothing, but who now crafted exquisite jewels for the super-rich. There were also Syrian car mechanics, Egyptian caretakers, Indian accountants, Danish ice-cream manufacturers, American diplomats and, of course, many, many oil workers.

Saturday to Wednesday we were fully occupied with school, Friday was church, but Thursday was our day to explore. This became a lot easier once we were able to buy a car. Kuwait itself did not hold much for the intrepid explorer. Being a flat desert mostly of gritty sand, about the same size as the state of New Jersey in the US or just a bit smaller than Wales, you could drive round it in a day. The population was almost exclusively housed in Kuwait City and its surrounding conurbation. Little was left

of the pre-oil kingdom – only the merest glimpses of the fishing culture in the *dhow* boatyards of Fahaheel, and small communities of Bedouin still preferring a life under canvas to the breeze-block walls of the town. A few traditional *Bayt Cha'er* – low-slung black goats' wool tents – could occasionally be found, but were always completed with a noisy generator and pick-up truck outside. The coast, however, was different. Kuwait Bay is a wide expanse of mud refreshed twice daily by the tide, bringing rich feeding for the cormorants, flamingos, herons and a host of waders – particularly in winter. Towards the south, uninterrupted white sandy beaches called us, fringing the piercingly blue waters of the Gulf.

But it was further afield that we looked for adventure – with school holidays at our disposal, Egypt and North Africa beckoned. Egypt was definitely top of the list of the "must see" places. Expats seemed divided after that – one group favouring the shopping experiences of Bahrain and Dubai, with the major alternative being the desert landscapes and history of Jordan and Morocco. A few intrepid explorers recommended Syria but no one we knew had been to the closest adventurous location – Iraq. The reason was simple; with the Iran/Iraq war raging for most of the previous decade, the ultimate Middle Eastern itinerary, taking in the crucible of civilization, was out of bounds. But all of that changed as the border was reopened to tourists and the first trickle entered from Kuwait in late 1989 and early 1990. We made plans!

With our friends Marianne and Stephen, we loaded up our four-wheel drive jeep and set off immediately at the end of school, at the National Day holiday in February. Wanting to maximize the four-day weekend, we made good time to the Iraqi border, passing the colossal oil wells illuminating the night-time desert of northern Kuwait with their pulsating orange flares. Smooth progress continued at the Kuwaiti exit post but ran into the Iraqi sand as a labyrinthine border process unfolded, with Iraqi officials housed in small semi-derelict huts alternately barking orders or fastidiously ignoring all human communication. Seven hours later we had

somehow performed all the tasks assigned to us, as evidenced by the stamps in our passports. Unfortunately the said passports were in the hands of yet another border guard who would rifle through the pages one at a time and then, having established the nationality of the document, throw it into the assembled crowd with the cry of "*French*" "*Suuri*" or in our happy case, "*Britch*."

And so we headed to Basra. We were hopelessly late for our reservations at the hotel, and in great need of a bed for the night. We quickly lowered our search criteria for acceptance of new hotels and found two small establishments that would shelter two "Britch" couples. This was no mean feat as Marianne has a pathological fear of insects and "no visible cockroaches" had been one of the original criteria. With so little time for the vast country ahead of us, we left Basra early and drove north to Baghdad first thing the next morning.

What struck me most forcibly was the countryside of Iraq. Here was the desert of Kuwait but with a huge difference – rivers! First the Shatt el Arab, the confluence of Iraq's great rivers, and then the Euphrates itself. For much of the journey, the sands were unaffected by the presence of these waterways, constrained as they were to linear conduits slicing through the landscape. But in places a more ancient pattern remained, with large areas of reed, open water and mud, hosting thriving communities of water birds and the *Madan*, the Marsh Arabs in their villages built of rushes. The productivity of the land was evidenced by the enormous flocks of ducks, coots and herons, and the water buffalo ploughing sodden furrows, trucks laden with vegetables and wayside stalls selling fruit. As we travelled north this organic landscape became less common, but the life-giving nature of the river was still obvious in the neat acres of green where it was used to irrigate plantations of dates.

My worst experience was filling the car with petrol. In this land of oil, petrol was cheaper than water – and used with similar abandon. Having removed the car's petrol cap, the attendant pulled the hose from the pump and started distributing the fuel over

me, the car bonnet and eventually into the fuel tank. As I jumped back and protested, he laughed between teeth clenching a lighted cigarette. Realizing a discussion on health and safety would not get me far – even if I could speak Arabic – I took a change of clothes from the back of the jeep and retreated to the small hut which served as a toilet. Here I was grateful that the petrol fumes masked, to a limited extent at least, the stench of the facility.

Baghdad was a city under a cloud. Brilliant sunshine, palm trees and the lapis blue of the minarets could not dispel the gloom. It infected the nervous greetings of our hotel hosts and the strained interactions with the taxi drivers. It was epitomized by the main decoration in the hotel lobby where we were staying. A full-sized cardboard cut-out of a middle-aged man in full military fatigues appeared from the opening curtains of a mock stage – Saddam Hussein. Despite the cloud, the locals we met were passionately hospitable and keen to hear news of the outside world. Conversations with the urbane and sophisticated Iraqis were full of Paris and London but went embarrassingly quiet if we asked about life in the republic.

Babylon – even the name is iconic; the world heritage site, like the nation, is a contradiction of a unique culture and the personal aggrandisement of one man. It is home to such world treasures as the Ishtar Gate, the eroded stump of the tower of Babel and the place of Hammurabi's code. As we entered the site we passed a huge banner. On the left characteristic wedge-shaped marks of cuneiform flowed from the profile of Nebuchadnezzar into Arabic script and the image of Saddam – the message was clear.

The Euphrates glides southwards below the brick fields of the ancient ziggurat famed as the tower of Babel. From the mound it looked so easy to reach the place where we could recite the words from Psalm 137 beloved by Bob Marley and Boney M, but just as the ancient Israelites were in a strange land, so were we. What looked like the setting for the perfect tourist picture turned out to be a military installation under cover of palm trees. The officer who verified we

were indeed lost tourists was gracious but firm, and as a result we had fewer snaps from the ruins as he ripped the film from the camera.

On our return south we were to meet the military again – in rather different circumstances. Driving along the nearly empty desert highway, miles from anywhere, we were overtaken by an articulated lorry. Just as its back wheels drew alongside us, it swerved to narrow the gap. As it sailed past I lost all control of the jeep and, at around seventy miles per hour, careered into the sand dune running along the roadside. We had noticed the knives sticking out from the hub caps of many of the trucks, Boudicca-style, previously, but had not appreciated their purpose till this point – to keep rival vehicles at a distance while overtaking, with tyre-shredding consequences if they did not give way sufficiently. After it dawned on us what had happened, we were left incredulous at the side of the road, the jeep half-buried in sand.

Even while we scratched our heads, a half-dozen or so Iraqi soldiers appeared as from nowhere, manually dragged the jeep out of the sand, lifted the frame and changed the wheel. Barely pausing for us to thank them, they were gone as quickly as they had come. As well as thanking our military guardian angels, we realized there were *a lot* of soldiers in Iraq.

Our brief trip to Iraq underlined the feeling that although we had begun to understand something of the international culture surrounding the school, we knew almost nothing of the Kuwaiti way of life. In Baghdad, if only briefly, we had learned a little about how Iraqis went about their daily lives, what concerned them, and how they viewed the outside world. These insights had come through conversations as we exchanged stories with our hosts, the owners of the hotel. Kuwaitis, insulated by wealth and a minority in their own country, kept themselves apart. However, a connection opened up for us into the conservative cocoon of Kuwaiti family life in an unexpected and dramatic way shortly after our Iraq trip.

In the early hours of a March morning, Susanna woke with paralyzing pains in her lower abdomen. Forbidden to go with

her in the ambulance, I followed in our car. Important as it was to arrive at the government hospital to admit Susanna, as a male relative was required for the admissions process, I was not allowed to pass reception, as this was a women's hospital and men were only permitted in the afternoon visiting hour. I was allowed to wait until a doctor emerged to tell me that nothing would be done during the night shift and I was to return the next day.

For me, the following days were a limbo of worry and brief encounters with Susanna – visiting under the rigorous schedule of the ward. In brief conversations I would learn of the tests carried out and the most recent theories of the medical staff. With some alarm I left after visiting on the third day with the news that if a pregnancy test came back positive it was an ectopic pregnancy and they would operate the next day. Worried that the doctors were jumping to over-hasty conclusions, I was determined to get a second opinion – at least by proxy.

Talking through the sequence of events with medical friends from church, our suspicions were confirmed – any such diagnosis would be premature. The news at the next visiting time that we were expecting a baby was not the great news that we had always hoped it would be. However, we did not agree with the doctors that the life needed to be lost as soon as possible and Susanna immediately prepared for emergency surgery. Instead, having been given all the papers and medical test results in her patient file and told to book her into the surgical ward, we waited till the medics left. Under cover of the hubbub of family visiting time, Susanna climbed out of the window, meeting me at the strategically parked car. We drove a few miles to a private hospital where I had arranged for a second consultation. Here we received the delightful news that Susanna had an ovarian cyst – which should be no danger to her early but normal pregnancy.

Prior to our flight, Susanna had experienced something of life behind the veil for the Kuwaiti women in the ward. Although I saw a flock of sombre birds, cloaked as the women were by the

full *abiyah* and veil, as soon as the visiting hour was over their true Kuwaiti plumage emerged. Once the danger of non-relative male eyes seeing an inch of skin had gone, the black curtains were drawn back and the sun came out. The brightly coloured and sequined clothes were only one part of the transformation. Susanna told me that the women's behaviour changed as dramatically as their garments. In an obstetrics and gynaecology ward, the full panoply of human experience is laid bare – joy with new life and the deep grief of loss. A sisterhood of patients supported one another – sharing with neighbour-strangers the most intimate details, tears, hugs and love.

As a Western patient in a government hospital, Susanna was unusual and attracted quizzical interest. She had placed a picture of me next to her bed, much to the delight and amusement of the Kuwaiti women. When, on one occasion, I kissed her prior to departure, at the end of the visiting hour, the action was greeted with a round of applause and, after my departure, when the visits were dissected by the ward matriarchs, Susanna learned a lot about Kuwaiti marriages. In contrast to the Western pattern, many Kuwaiti women find their deepest friendships and support in female relatives and friends. The thought that your best friend might be your husband was bizarre in the extreme.

Our brief hospital encounter started a process that would carry on – getting to know the Arab culture from the inside. To me, who could only see the *abiyah* and veil, the women appeared impersonal, cold and aloof. They could not look me in the eye and would remove their hand if I extended mine in greeting. But Susanna had entered their world and found a reality far removed from this superficial impression. The Middle East was beginning to beguile us with its mysterious beauty. While it was not always easy to appreciate on the surface, we had glimpsed, through its wrappings, something of its colour, texture and warmth.

As the brief spring melted into summer, our thoughts turned increasingly to home. With thoughts of England's green fields,

family, and a pint at the pub, we made preparations for a short UK holiday before returning for the next academic year in the Gulf. On arrival, we experienced a drop of 30 degrees C to what seemed the cool 25 degrees C of a good English summer.

Shortly after, in desolation we returned to hospital as Susanna miscarried our first child. After convalescence and time with our families, we determined to experience the full restorative beauty of "green" and so set off for a holiday to the Outer Hebrides. It was while en route that we heard the world-stopping news that Iraqi troops had invaded Kuwait. It made no sense. There had been no warning. Why? How were our friends? What would happen to our apartment, our belongings? What next for the country, for us?

No one had any answers, but we recognized the need to go south as soon as possible. Kuwaiti assets were about to be frozen and the only UK branch of the National Bank of Kuwait that held all our worldly wealth was in London. They were allowing withdrawals of up to £1,000 a day. We got there in time for one withdrawal before the accounts were frozen, by which time we realized, with the rest of the world, that looted and occupied Kuwait would never be the same again and we were very unlikely to return.

August is not a good time to be an unemployed teacher. As soon as head teachers returned to their desks late in the month, we started the search for temporary work. At different ends of the spectrum, Susanna got a job in a prep school in Oxford and I commuted to Tower Hamlets for a supply post in a large comprehensive school.

As we slowly put our own lives back together, every night, horrified, we watched the pictures coming out of Kuwait. Our neighbourhood was overrun with troops, Kuwaitis were being summarily executed, Westerners had either gone into hiding or been taken as captives to Baghdad. As a society we are inured to pictures of war – they are a nightly spectacle beamed into our living rooms. When these sights are coming from your street, your shopping centres, your school, then the truth hits. War is horrific and it is the ordinary citizens who suffer most – people just like us. One

image more than any other captured the pain of our separation and anxiety over the fate of Kuwait and its people; the figure of a vulnerable five-year-old British schoolboy, his hair ruffled by the Butcher of Baghdad, grabbed media headlines and brought down the wrath of the international community. For Susanna, he was one of the children in the classroom next door.

Autumn turned to winter. The numbers of Western troops in Saudi Arabia grew and the rhetoric from Iraq became more bellicose, the two sides squaring up for war. Like two rival stags, the posturing lasted far longer than the conflict as, despite near-equal numbers, this was to be no equal contest. Although we prayed for the deliverance of Kuwait, news from the battlefields left us chilled. Leaving behind a looted and broken city, large numbers of ill-equipped Iraqi troops surrendered, many without boots. Others fled, only to be annihilated in their thousands by massive air strikes on their retreating convoys. Mutla Ridge, which we knew as a scenic picnic spot, became the dying grounds for two Iraqi divisions. The carbonized corpses melded to the tanks, army trucks and stolen cars, limousines and fire engines carrying the pickings of a sacked city. Is this where our stolen jeep met its end? And what about the conscripts who had rescued us, barely a year earlier, from the sands just a few kilometres up the same road? Were they incinerated as they fled?

It was over. Kuwait had been liberated. In the coming months, some friends would return to help rebuild the country, but we had new jobs, a new home and a new child on the way. Often, when people asked what it was like to lose everything in such a dramatic way, we would honestly be able to say that what we had lost, God had given us back. Of our personal possessions nothing remained (our apartment building had been completely looted by the retreating Iraqi army), but through the generosity of friends and family and renewed employment, we had a furnished home again.

The only thing we really missed – the one thing that we felt was irreplaceable – was our wedding album. One day, on returning

from school to our new home in Lincoln, a package was waiting for us – inside the house, the front door locked and the parcel without any stamps. The white and gold folder was sandy and had the clear imprint of a soldier's boot on its cover, but it was our wedding album. We heard God saying: "I hear – I know."

It took us three restorative years before we felt ready to return to the Arab world. In many ways, even now, it is still recovering from the events of the early 1990s. Events still far in the future were to trace their beginnings to the Gulf deserts with Western armies encamped to protect the international trade of oil. But that was all still to come and several countries later.