Memories of Rahija

Abe J. Bassett, Wright State University

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Memories of Rahija
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Remembrances of Rahija Saad Bassett
May 26, 1891 — June 19, 1983

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of her birth.

Written by her children and grandchildren, nephews and nieces, cousins and friends.

And Rahija’s story told in her words.

edited by
Abe J. Bassett
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Fort Wayne, Indiana
Preface

Sometime in 1987, sadly, I realized that my father, who would have been 102 had he lived, passed the milestone of his 100th birthday without note or commemoration. I vowed this would not happen with my mother, Rahija Saad Bassett.

In early May, 1991, I wrote to all of her children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, cousins, and others, asking them to pause for a moment of reflection at the noon hour on her date of birth. And I also asked for a written remembrance: a story, an incident, an impression to be shared. This book is a collection of those individual memories which have come together to form a vivid image of a loving, nurturing woman, who seldom complained of ill fortune, who loved God, and nature, and life, and her children, and all those about her.

Her stories are a part of our family folklore and her history is a vital part of our heritage. This collection gives us a unique way to remember her, and an opportunity to pass on to our children and their children and their children’s children the heritage which helped to shape us and them.

Thank you all for your memories, and I thank my sisters for their special help.

A.J.B.
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Mama had a myth she lived by. It was that she and Papa would have a large house on some acreage, and all her children would have their own houses on the same land. We would all be one happy family, and Mama would be forever mother of us all.

Abe J. Bassett
I remember Sitti—

Hands flying as she turned a ball of dough into a paper-thin large piece of flat bread.

Face laughing as the babies said “un-goo-ga,” obviously talking only to her!

Fingers flashing through the grape leaves and meat making her special dish for the whole family.

Eyes shining at the new flower, fruit, herb, vegetable in her inside and outside gardens.

Feet tapping, dressed in her special Lebanese dresses, waiting for the party to begin.

I remember stories—

...of the young child, going to the olive grove and finding a new baby camel, rushing back home full of the discovery and wonder of new life.

...of the beautiful stepmother, miraculously come to take a mother’s role in her life only to return to Beirut unable to endure the rigors of rural living,
leaving the young girl, once again, to resume the duties of "woman" of the household—childhood, carefree days gone forever.

...of the greenhorn who spoke no English, entering the U.S.A., only to have her money and food stolen.

...of the young girl making the long train trip, alone, across one-third of America with a box of crackers, three pears, and her brother’s name and address pinned to her dress...still, however, filled with anticipation and dreams.

I remember Sitti——

of the loving heart
giving nature
positive outlook

Always ready for a party, adventure, trip—
Always read to feed, nurture, care for——
Always filled with the wonder, delight, and excitement of a life never dull, boring, or useless.

Sharon Kinnaird Bassett
Memories Of Rahija, c. 1912
Rahija’s Story
as told to Abe J. Bassett

My father’s name is Asseef Saad. I remember, when I was three years old as we sat by the fire, he was speaking with my mother and he hit her on the face. I couldn’t understand why. I was three years old. He hit her, she fell down. The men in the old country, if they get mad, they hit their wife.

My mother brought five children; Maheba, the eldest, Slamen (Sam), the second, the third is Ispiridon (Jasper), myself, Rahija, and Della, the fifth.

My mother wasn’t happy when—the first time in Kfeir—all the men said they wanted to go to America. So a number of them, maybe 20, came to America; they wanted to make money and return to Kfeir. They went to different places in America—my father to Toledo. My father saw that my

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1Rahija’s story derives from two taped conversations, recorded on November 23, 1973, and December 26, 1978, in Dayton, Ohio, when she was 82 and 87 years of age. The story of Rahija is also told by Selma Bassett Edinger on pages 108-113.

2In Arabic, the names are spelled, Mahiiba, Slaymeen, Isbiiriidon, Dallii, and Rahiija. [Ernest McCarus provided Arabic translations and spelling. Some diacritical markings were omitted by the editor.]
mother was sick, but he stayed four years in America, and then he returned home.

My mother died\(^3\) when my Father was in America. A man—a very good man—once saw my mother outside after she had her baby. He said to my mother, "Numnum, don't walk outside." My mother died, she didn't care, I guess. I don't know why. My mother brought five children and every time she had a baby, she didn't stay in bed, she made herself get up to work. And this way she didn't live too long. It wasn't good. And she had two sisters to help her, one was named Amiini and the other Miryam.

I can't remember my mother's face. I was young when she died. She was sick for quite a while when my father went to America. I remember her sitting in the chair and when she died that night, it was raining, raining too much. I don't remember who took her. *Ya haram* (God help him\(^4\)), when they die over there, they dig a hole and lay them in the ground; they don't have a coffin. I don't know who buried my mother.

My father returned from America and there was

\(^3\)According to Jaspar, Nunnum died of a tumor. [Related by Jaspar's wife, Clara Sword Saad.]

\(^4\)The literal translation of *haram* is "forbidden," "unlawful," or "prohibited."
an Arab woman who said to him that there is a very sweet and good woman in Beirut, whose name is Máliki, "like a Queen." She was widowed and she had three children, and she was pretty—very, very pretty. My father went to Beirut and married Máliki and brought her to Kfeir. But any woman, when they live in the city, they don’t know how to live in the country, because they are used to the big city. So my step-mother stayed just two years, she couldn’t stand my father. My father is a good man, but he liked to drink and he drank every night. His friends would come every night and they would play cards and drink and talk. Máliki couldn’t stand his ways and so she returned to Beirut. The children did not come to Kfeir. She brought them to the village only one time so we could see them. I don’t know where they lived in Beirut. Beautiful children.

I liked my step-mother a lot. My sister and I helped her a lot, but she couldn’t live in our little town, with my father. My father, when he drank a little, he had bad thinking. We figured that she left by the road, walking. We figured that men and people, who are very good in our country, saw her on the road, and helped her to get home to Beirut. The people there never hurt anybody.

My house was built of stones, before I was born, and each stone was this wide. Our house was divided into four rooms. My father and I lived on this side, and on the other side lived Uncle Ayyoob and his wife.
Asseef, in Kfeir, circa 1903, flanked by Máliki and her son (?).
Every morning I would rise and the first thing I saw were the mountains—Jabal el Shaykh. Shaykh means "old man." The mountain was very, very tall. The highest mountain had snow on the top throughout the year. It was very pretty. Every morning, I loved to look at the mountain with the snow. Beautiful, so beautiful. That mountain is where the Devil took Jesus.

When I started going to school, I loved school, but I couldn't keep going, because they had to keep me home. The school was far from our house at the edge of the village. I learned enough to read and write. I wouldn't go to sleep until I studied my lessons for tomorrow. The teachers at the school were Arab. The Russians took care of the school. They did teach some Russian, but all I remember were two words rus, vow, rus, vow, right and left, for marching. They were good Russians, not like the Russians in this day. I went to school two years or three years, just enough to understand how to read and write, just enough to learn a little Arabic. Every night before I slept, I read a little. What I learned I kept. When I saw Arabic, I read.

My brother Jasper taught children in school. My father sent Jasper to Damascus to school. There

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5The English name of Jabal el Shaykh is Mount Hermon. At 9232 feet above sea level, the mountain is usually snow-capped, like a man with grey hair, hence, "the old-man mountain."
was a disease in Damascus and he had to return home. The disease killed people quick. And he did not go there anymore. Della and I went to school in the village. We had to walk about a half mile to the edge of town. I don’t know how long Della or Maheba went to school, but they all learned to read and write.

My father needed me very bad in the house, so I had to stay home and do all the work. I worked enough for man-work, woman-work, housekeeping-work, shepherd-work. I climbed trees, I took care of the goats, the sheep, I worked a lot—a lot—in the house and I worked outside. I worked a lot and was very tired.

My father bought sheep and goats, and he would slaughter twice a week, and the people came to buy meat when they knew that he had slaughtered a goat. I would help my father slaughter the goat; I would hold their feet and we would tie them. The people came and bought the day of the slaughter, because you have to buy it today and cook it today. Because I learned some Arabic, I would write who bought the meat and how much they bought. They didn’t pay the day they bought, so in about a week, I would go their houses and ask for the money they owed for the meat. I don’t know why they didn’t have the money the day they purchased the meat.

We used to drink water which we got from the ayn; about a block and a half away. The water was very good from this well. A long time earlier, some
Photographed in Kfeir, c. 1900
Standing, from left to right:
(nephew of Ayyoob?), Sam, Jaspar, wife of Ayyoob, Rahija
Seated: Asseef, Ayyoob
Children in front: Della(?), Zahiyya (daughter of Ayyob)
Memories Of

I don’t know how they did it—brought water through pipes and built a cistern. Every day, maybe three or four times a day, I would bring water from the ayn. All the women in the village went to the ayn with large jars—five gallon jars—and carried them on their head to their houses. Because I was close, it was easy for me.

The grapes began to ripen the first of July, and every day in season we ate figs and grapes. We picked the grapes and put them on the ground and let them dry. The same thing with the figs. I would get up early in the morning and take baskets to harvest figs. First, I would eat some and then I put them in the basket. We would put the figs on the roof of the house so they could dry out.

When we planted wheat, the men prepared the ground, and when the wheat grew tall, the men came to harvest the wheat. It was a community effort, and the wheat was brought together. We brought mules and when it was time to cut the wheat, I would sit on the mule and kick the mule, and we would harvest the wheat. When it was done, the men would bring something with a long handle, to separate the wheat from the straw. The wind would blow away the straw and the wheat would fall to the ground. When they were finished, the men would carry the wheat to the house.

We didn’t have good water when we washed clothes—the water was too hard. We would get wood and put it outside, and when we wanted soft
water, we got ashes from wood, and filled the large tub with water and ashes, leaving it in the water for a day or two. This way the water would become softer for washing clothes. When the clothes were washed we would lay the material on the rocks and on the trees.

Everything was hard. I would cook outside every day in the summer time. I started a wood fire among the rocks and put the pot on the fire. I cooked *mjaddara* (lentils and rice). In the winter, we had a place inside where we could start a fire and the smoke would go up the chimney. I put a rock here and a rock there, the pot on top, and a fire underneath.

I made bread once a week. We didn’t have any yeast so we took figs, put them in a sack to leave in the tree for three days, and it makes yeast. When we make bread—khubz marquuq⁶—we first burn wood in a stone barrel until only hot coals are left. I put the bread on a cushion. We didn’t have to turn the bread over. When one is finished, we put on another one. In the morning I would eat the khubz with honey and cheese.

As a child I played only with my sister (Della). She was three years younger than me. Sometimes we played in the house. We had good neighbors but I didn’t play with neighbor children. All the people were very good there; they all spoke nicely.

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⁶A flat bread, 12 to 14 inches in diameter.
But we didn’t have any body to play with, just me and my sister.

We didn’t have fancy dresses, just something plain and cheap; we wore long dresses, not short dresses. We would buy from someone who must be a tailor, somebody would come from another town to sell material. I can’t remember who made the dresses. The material was not exactly white.

I don’t remember any large get-togethers or festivals in Kfeir. I don’t remember people in Kfeir celebrating birthdays. No, no birthdays—I never heard.

We didn’t have any music to go by. The people could sing, but there was no music, no instruments. We sang, we knew how to sing. If I know a song, I sang. Khudhni ُala bilaadi bitnyyaara, bittayyaara, bittayyaara, (*Take me to the old country in an airplane, in an airplane, in an airplane.*)

A few girls would go outside and start a fire and cook and eat, but not very often because I was very busy helping my father. I remember once upon a time, a young man from Hasbaya, maybe five miles away, came with a minjáyra. *A minjáyra* is a flute with three holes, which they played. That is all, we never had any other music. But when they wanted to sing, they sang what they knew.

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*7A flute made of a hollow reed or metal pipe, open on both ends, with several finger-holes drilled in it, capable of producing beautiful music. [Ernest McCarus]*
I didn’t have any boy (friend) I liked in Kfeir. I had a first cousin, my aunt’s son, a young man from Hasbaya, I thought was very beautiful. I don’t know why my aunt brought him to us. He was a very nice looking young man. I never did care for anybody. When my father was living, two men liked me and came to ask my father about me. I didn’t know what my father said, but I didn’t like them, I didn’t want to look at them!

_Hasîtri_ is a mat made from straw, placed on the floor. If some men were interested in a girl they would come to visit. They would look under the _hasîtri_ to see if there was dirt.

I remember Abraham from Kfeir. He made little shoes for me. He was learning to make shoes, and another Saad, Jurius, was making flats for the women. I went, it wasn’t far, so he could sew my slippers, and he never forgot me. Abraham’s mother and my mother were about third cousins; they were close to each other. ‘So Ibrîhiim, I remember you when you made little shoes for me.’

I never walked to _Jabal el Shaykh_, but I walked in the hills. _Jabal el Shaykh_ is far away. I remember that the men would bring snow from the mountain which we would buy to mix with syrup; it was good.

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*Jabal el Shaykh* lies on the border between Syria and Lebanon, with an peak elevation of 9,232 feet above sea level. It is part of the north-south Lebanon range whose other peaks range from 7532 to 8799 feet.
The mountain was very tall, the sun would rise behind it, but *Jabal el Shaykh* is very far. There are no people (who live) in the mountains. I think this is the mountain where the Devil took Jesus, and said to him, "If you bow to me, I will give you everything." Jesus let the Devil talk, and then said to him, "Get away from here, Devil."

In Kfeir, the nights were not cold, the winter was not cold. It would rain a little in the night and wouldn't stay long, and as soon as it dried, it was just like it didn't rain.

Who were our neighbors? Yes, here is a house, and here is another, some are Druze. I knew the Cantees, I knew everybody all over town.

My sister Maheba, was the oldest child, and she came to America first with her father and the group of men who went as peddlers; that is how they made money. Maheba also went to peddle, and the men didn't like that. It wasn't good for girls to be peddlers; they didn't want Maheba to become a peddler. Three or four men spoke with Jurius Kerbawy and he spoke with my father to

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Maheba came with Asseef in 1895. She went to work as a peddler and saved $300. She was responsible for purchasing passage for her oldest brother Sam. It became Sam's responsibility to purchase tickets for Jaspar and Rahija. [Minnie Kerbawy]
marry my sister Maheba, and they got married. Maheba went to America first, and then Sam, and then Jasper. (I remember before Ispiridon died, he brought me $25—I don’t know why, but that time, I guess he knew he was not well. I didn’t know he was sick.)

In 1911, my father went to Hasbaya to buy money for me for my ticket. It wasn’t very much, I don’t know—$25 dollars? Our neighbor, Heinii Hawarnii, was in America and he came to Kfeir to get married. They had one child, and then he returned to America a second time. There was a neighbor whose husband was in America, and he wanted her to come to America with her children. So all of us, two neighbors and I, came together.

Before I left home, lots of people came to send us off, and that night my father said, Rahija, duqqii-l-qahwi. I used to make music. I daqqayt-l-qahwi

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10 Apparently, because Asseef opposed this marriage, George and Maheba eloped. [Clara Sword Saad]

11 Jaspar arrived in Philadelphia in 1905 at the age of 17.

12 A typical trans-atlantic steerage fare in the first decade of the twentieth century was $25 to $35.

13 Her father instructed Rahija to "beat the coffee," or to "make music" using the mortar and pestle used to pulverize the coffee beans. The pestle-wielder beats a loud rhythm announcing to the neighborhood the preparation of coffee. [Ernest McCarus]
and lots of people came by the road and came to the house to send us off. When people leave, the other people came to say goodbye. They say to them, *Mac issaleémi* ("go with peace; goodbye").

A second day, I gathered my clothes, I didn’t bring many clothes, we didn’t have suitcases, I put the clothes in a satchel. And climbed from the house with the neighbors that were going to America. Two men with mules took us to Beirut. We left with the two men and two mules and we were gone two days to Beirut. The sun was hot. I walked a while and rode a while. The sun made my face red all over, after two days. I left in June, 1911—June 11th. When we got to Beirut, my stepmother Máliki was there, and they took me to stay with her a couple of days until the ship came. She was very beautiful and just twenty five years old. I went by boat from Beirut to Marseilles, then by train (to Paris), then by ship (from Le Harve). We stayed in Marseilles. I had to wait one week in Marseilles. They couldn’t find the town Pikeville, but they found the little town of Paintsville, which was 25 miles from Pikeville.¹⁴ (In Paris), the families took me to the zoo, and you go up high

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¹⁴Rahija seems to recall that this occurred in Marseilles, but it is far more probable that this difficulty occurred in New York. It is a fact that she arrived with $22, money enough to purchase her rail ticket to Pikeville.
and you can see the whole city.\textsuperscript{15}

I don’t remember if I had much money; I think I just had enough money for a train ticket. I took bread with me. On the boat, I ate very little. My complexion was very good. On the boat, I learned to drink coffee with milk and sugar. The Titanic went down one year before I came across the ocean. The trip was pleasant. I stayed outside all day long, and at night they had places to sleep, like "bunks." Lots of people in big rooms. Oh, if only I had a thinking cap; if only I brought with me a pencil, but I didn’t think.

We arrived in Ellis Island. One woman there could speak Arabic and she asked me "Are you married?" I said, "I am a girl."\textsuperscript{16} They separate the people on the Island. Everybody goes the way they are going. I had to come by train. If only I had good thinking: my neighbor, Heinii Hawarnii is going to Toledo, Ohio, which is close to my sister. He could have brought me to Toledo. If only I could think right, but nobody could think right.

They separate the people, and the ones who can’t speak English they have a ticket put on their coats so people can tell where they are going. Then, I was waiting for the train to go to Pikeville. There

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}Is this the Eiffel Tower?
\item \textsuperscript{16}In Kfeir, the word for "girl" is \textit{sabiyyi} which also implies an "unmarried woman" at any age. [Ernest McCarus]
\end{itemize}
was a French family and they could read English, and they helped put me on a train.\textsuperscript{17} I went on the train, and it took two whole days, and I worried so much. I didn’t eat on the train. I had a little bit of food, I had an apple, but someone stole it, so I didn’t have anything to eat. I had sent Sam a letter before I left Kfeir, but I got there before the letter, so they didn’t know I was coming. The conductor put me off the train, “Go to the depot,” he said.

I had, all the time, an envelope, written on it, “Sam Saad, my brother, Pikeville, Kentucky.” I was worried, and couldn’t eat and wished I could see my brother. People came to me and they talked to me, and they wanted to know who I was, they wanted to know what is wrong with me. All I could say was “Sam Saad, my brother, Pikeville, Kentucky.” When people asked me, I showed them the letter, “My brother Sam Saad, Pikeville, Kentucky.” If I showed the conductor the letter before they put me off at Paintsville, he knows Sam, he could take me right to my brother.

I sit there in the depot, I sit inside, I sit outside. I wait and I worry all the time. I thought, “I want my brother,” and “I don’t know where I am.” And there was a lucky thing. A girl, a young woman sitting across the street saw me, and she didn’t know

\textsuperscript{17}The boarding of trains took place on Ellis Island as train cars were brought on ferry boats or barges saving the immigrants the difficult task of catching their trains in Manhattan or New Jersey.
what is wrong with me, and she wanted to know, so she came to see why I look different, why I look strange. I had a white blouse, pink skirt, sandals on my feet, and my hair is hanging on my shoulder and I had a white scarf on my head. She came to see who is the strange looking woman or girl, and I showed her the envelope. I said "Sam Saad, my brother, Pikeville, Kentucky." "Well," she said, "I know Sam Saad, I used to live there, I just moved." She didn't tell me, but I think she called to Pikeville, and she said he will be there at six o'clock.

At six o'clock my brother came, and I saw him. He came in a wagon that holds seven people. I know that's my brother! He has a summer hat and is dressed in summer clothes. I was sitting outside and I saw him, and as soon as I saw him, I didn't know what to do, so I laughed and cried, laughed and cried. I recognized him right away. He said, "Don't cry, sister, don't cry. Let's go eat." For two days I had not eaten, I couldn't eat, I was worried. He said come on, and he took me to a restaurant. The people were surprised, it was the first time they saw a Syrian girl, an Arab girl.

Now, we are going to catch the train to Pikeville, and we went on the same train. Sam wasn't

18 Sam was then 24 years of age, having left Kfeir about 1904 when he would have been 19 and Rahija 13.
married. He had a store, selling stuff. Jasper was there too, he came almost the same day from learning to be a photographer.

We went to Mrs. Yost's (boarding house), and they gave me a room, and I went to sleep there. Sam had a sleeping room with Mrs. Yost. There was a man there, I think he was Muslim, he wanted to talk to me. My brother Sam told him "Do not talk to her." He didn't want him to talk to me.

The next day, my brother wouldn't let me go out until I was dressed like an American. He went and got a woman and she measured me and saw what I needed. They brought me a pretty, white blouse, long neck, long sleeves, and the skirt was fit tight at the waist but big at the hem. I was thin, very thin, and the slip touched the floor.

There was a very nice young lady at Mrs. Yost's. The next day the lady fixed my hair. My hair was hanging on my back and she put my hair up, and

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Sam, who started his business career as a peddler, had arrived in Pikeville in 1904. He came to Pikeville because it had only one grocery story. Sam and Jaspar went into business together. They introduced 'niggertoes' [Brazil nuts] and oranges to Pikeville. Jaspar and Sam were Pikeville's first "foreigners". To avoid discrimination they decided that when they were in the store they should only speak English. Williamson, by contrast, had many foreigners: Italians, Armenians, Syrians, Jews, and was more tolerant than Pikeville. [Clara Sword Saad]
put a ribbon on my hair.

One time, a man came and wanted to kiss me. What a crazy man. Crazy! They think they are like Americans. I wouldn’t let him. Crazy! We don’t do that in the old country.20

My brother took me twice to eat where he eats. They had a carnival, and we rode the ferris wheel. We stayed two days, and he said, “Come, let’s go to Maheba.” Sam took me to Blissfield, Michigan, and I stayed there with my sister Maheba for several months.

It was in Blissfield that I first saw Ibihiim. He was a peddler, and he would buy and sell things. Ibihiim21 came to visit me, and he remembered me when I was young. He came to talk. Just talk. In time, he began talking to Jurius Kerbawy that he wants to marry me. He didn’t talk to me but he talked to my sister22 and her husband. They talked to me for a long time, but I couldn’t make up my mind. Jurius kept talking to me till he made up my mind. Abraham went to Pikeville to my brother Sam to tell him that he would like to marry

20It is not clear if this incident occurred while Rahija was in Pikeville.

21Abraham apparently was living with his mother and father on their farm about four miles from Blissfield.

22Maheba was the matchmaker who brought Abraham and Rahija together. [Minnie Kerbawy]
me. Uncle Sam wrote to my father in Kfeir and asked permission to let me marry Abraham, and he said it was okay. —Abraham, he was a good man, he was such a good man. Too bad! I wish he kept living. — I was twenty-two and he was twenty-eight when we married. He was a very good man.

I have in the house two large Bibles with information about our family. My brother, Jasper, when he was alive, told me to write when they were born. So I wrote in Arabic about my brothers and sisters. I wrote everything. I wrote when he left and when he returned. I wrote it in the Bible. It is in the Bible in the house. I wrote when people were born and when they married. All written.
Rahija’s Story of The Camel

The Camel.

A long, long time ago, when I was in my home in the old country in Lebanon (beautiful Lebanon, I wish I could see it), three men came from Palestine, and they had three camels with them. They came down to our house. My father was always very generous, and he always invited people to the house. My father invited the three men to the house to feed them.

The front door of our house faced Jabal El Shaykh to the east which was so pretty with snow on it all the time. On this side of our house we had a little land, and we told them to put the camels there.

In the morning, I usually take a broom with a short handle and sweep the yard. The camel was watching, and I decided I want to tease the camel. I don’t know where I got this idea from. Maybe I heard it, so, I stood (close to the camel), and I said,

Wizz, ʕayn̂nik, fil-qaadāus, fi-l-minnshaár,
Wizz, ʕayn̂nik, fil-qaadāus, fi-l-minnshaár.23

23Young children in Kfeir probably used wizz ʕayn̂ak... to make other children jealous or envious. A possible meaning is "may your eyes bulge out," but a more literal meaning is "may your eye be burned." This is probably an old traditional
In a minute I saw the camel’s eyes get bigger and bigger, and redder and redder, and they start moving a little bit. And their eyes got so big. How do they know I was teasing them? And when the camel starts moving, I moved. Our yard goes down, one step here, and another step, and another. I ran down. They started chasing. I laid by one step. When the camel ran down, he couldn’t stop because he has long steps. I was lucky, because if one foot came on me I would be mashed. But they kept running until they went to the bottom and found level land. And that’s the story of my camel.

Rahija Saad Bassett

saying that has lost its lexical meaning, but its cultural meaning is clear. Qaadíus may mean “haystack” but its dictionary meaning is “bucket.” Thus, this chant may mean “Burn your eye with a bucket (and) with a saw.” [Ernest McCarus]
The Saad Genealogy

The Saad family left Ras el Matn in Lebanon and came to Kfeir some two hundred years ago. This family had two or three houses at the extreme southern tip of town and two more in the center, northwest of the public fountain (ayn). The men of this family became land owners and monopolized the butchering trade all their lives. Some of them in later years became shoemakers.

Arreph El-Khoury, Kfeir, Lebanon

24Ras el Matn is a small village in the mountains, 10 air miles or 17 road miles, east of Beirut.
Memories Of

Flying from Suitors

After Mama’s oldest sister, Maheba, and her brothers, Sam and Jasper, went to America, she developed a very intense desire to join them. She discussed this with her father, Asseef, many times, but he was reluctant to let her go.

As a pretty 17 or 18 year old girl, she was certainly an eligible young woman and there were several suitors in the village. It was customary in the old country for marriages to be arranged, but Mama wanted none of that.

At about this time, Mama had a recurring dream. Men were chasing her and she escaped by flying around the village on a carpet. She would fly from roof-top to roof-top, looking down on the village, and upon the men who were her prospective suitors.

Finally her father consented and Rahija came to America and married Abraham, who, years before, had been suggested as her potential fiancee.

Selma Bassett Edinger
Rahija was always a happy person, a laughing woman, ten years my senior. She came to Blissfield "on a stormy, rainy day," escorted by her brother Sam. "Come on in and see your sister," he said. At first Maheba did not recognize Rahija because she hadn't seen her since she was four years old.

Rahija stayed in Blissfield for six months, from May through November in 1913, working some at the Blissfield Fur Coat Factory as a seamstress. She shared my bed and joked with me about my taking all the bed covers. She used to call my father "Ammii Jurius" (Uncle George) because he was about 14 years older. Rahija, when she came to America, worried about Della, her younger sister. Rahija and Abraham married in our house in Blissfield on February 2, 1914.

Minnie Kerbawy
Memories Of

Rahija, circa 1913, age 23
Courage, Faith, Inner Beauty

It was during the Great Depression when my family moved from Pikeville, Kentucky, to Williamson, West Virginia, where my father had bought an interest in a (movie) theatre. The theatre business failed. My father was a professional photographer and he had already opened a studio in downtown Williamson.

We soon learned that people have to buy bread or clothing, but one thing they could do without was having their pictures made. Therefore, my father's net profits were meager for himself, his wife, and four children.

I went to the home of his sister, Rahija (Mrs. Abe) Bassett many times. Her daughter, Selma, and I were near in age and classmates. When my brothers and sister and I were visiting, Aunt Rahija always saw to it we were fed well. She was so kind to us even thought she had a houseful of children already. I never remember her getting irritated with us or raising her voice to us although I am sure she had provocation.

The Lebanese food she cooked is always in my memory and I am always wishing I had some now. Her graciousness in spite of her burdens from housework and child-bearing had an effect on me I did not realize at the time.

When my Dad came home once after attending a
Kfeirian reunion and told me that at age 90, she had danced a graceful dance with a glass of water on her head, not spilling a drop, I thought: "That's my Aunt Rahija." She had courage, faith and an inner beauty I have seen in very few people. I think this helped her live as long as she did.

I keep her in my memory and in my heart.

Lucille Saad Smith
One quality that I remember in Aunt Rahija is that she was a very sweet lady, full of love for her kin. I always looked forward to visiting her and her family. I felt comfortable in her home and especially in her presence, knowing that this special aunt of mine was genuinely happy to have me and my family as guests. I shall always cherish her hospitality and kinship.

Dewey Bassett
I never remember Mama saying a bad thing about any specific person, though I do recall her thinking that certain groups of people were "bad people." For example, a group of youthful toughs might be bad; or people who hurt other people were bad. These "bad people" would earn her most severe disapproval, which was usually a guttural Arabic sound and a sneering lip.

But she never thought ill of anyone. She loved all her children and loved them equally. She never entertained the thought that one child was more important than another.
What a beautiful word is "Khalti"; it has such a lovely ring to it. What a beautiful language Arabic is; the word "Khalti" itself tells you this person is "the sister of your mother."

My mother, Della Saad McCarus, was the baby of the family who had a wonderful life with her sister, Rahija Saad Bassett, four years her elder. Some of my fondest and most lasting memories are of the stories they told and the contagious laughter they had when they were together. They both loved life and family and visited each other often to talk about the "good old days." You could hear their voices coming from the adjacent room, laughing and talking, until you were drawn to them. Voilà, before you realized it, you were laughing with them, roaring, holding your sides with pain, and sometimes not even knowing why!

One of their most favorite stories, told numerous times, occurred when they were very young girls. Their father woke them to get some kindling to start a fire to warm the home for his guests. Since it was late in the evening they were both sleepy and they both went to find the wood. Later when they realized what they had done, they were both very surprised and the roaring laughter started. We waited patiently for the rest of the story. "What
happened? What did you do?" we asked.

Finally, they were able to tell us. They had thrown their slippers into the fire, thinking they were kindling! They kept on laughing and we joined them, laughing uncontrollably!

Khalti Rahija was always a loving, open-armed, smiling woman, very articulate and strong (watch out for her handshake), full of hospitality.

We loved it when she played the piano and sang for us. Khalti and Mother always did their Arabic dancing with the glasses of water on their heads. Making any occasion festive and fun for everyone. I do believe they were having the most fun of all, and always with a smile!

Khalti — say it and

hear love

and feel joy!

Mary Frances McCarus Zegeer
Rahija, the Dancer

When I think of the A. J. Bassett family that lived here in Williamson for many years, it brings back fond memories.

It was a joy to have Rahija and her fine family as friends and neighbors. A. J. Bassett operated a very nice store and was highly respected in this community. Yes, I did work for A. J. as a youngster a few summers; it was a learning experience, and fun.

There are a lot of memories concerning Rahija. The one that stands out at this moment is that when she would attend the Reunion—and she attended many—she would chaperon all her kids. At the Grand Ball we all looked forward to seeing Rahija do her dance with the glass of water on her head. Not once did she spill the glass—quite a feat! If you think it’s easy, try it sometime.

No evening was complete without Rahija performing her act!

Abe J. Cantees
She was my aunt. I remember her when I was a child, she was always glad to see me and was very loving. I remember that seeing her was exciting for me. She had a great affection for myself and the entire family.

I can remember her at gatherings where she would be a central figure. She would carry on conversations with many people and have a jolly time. She was especially talented in Arabic dancing.

All of us were very fond of Aunt Rahija. My grandmother, father, mother, and I could never forget her. There was much love and affection between her and the family.

Joseph S. Bassett
Mama Said I Was An Angel

After living ten years out-of-state, we returned to Dayton, Ohio, in 1970. Through the years I was frequently in Columbus on business trips, and always dropped by the house to say hello to Mama either before or after the meeting.

I would walk into the house, usually without knocking or ringing the door bell. Almost always, Mama was either in the front room watching television or writing in her diary, or in the kitchen cooking.

"Hello, Mom," I would announce, and she would never fail to be surprised, then amazed, and then delighted. She would say "You are like an angel, who comes from my dreams. I was thinking of you, and here you are!"

And we would laugh together.

Abe J. Bassett
I remember Aunt Rahija to this day when I close my eyes and think back to all the Kfeirian reunions which I attended over the years during my school years.

I remember the Arabic cocktail hour would usually have music. Later in the evening, when the music had been underway, Aunt Rahija would start dancing with a glass of water perched on top of her head. While Aunt Rahija danced some of the young people in the audience would snicker and ask why is she doing that—at her age. Some would say how talented she was and some would say no one asked her to dance like that.

As a young child, then a teenager, and finally as an adult, when attending the reunions, I would say to myself, that is my Aunt Rahija. She must have a lot of patience to learn something like that and not ever to drop a glass. She always seemed to be smiling—my Aunt Rahija!

Jameel Saad
I remember Mama as a lover of music.

It wasn’t an extraordinary thing that I should have this image of Mama because I grew up with music in the house.

All of my sisters played musical instruments. They played the piano, the mandolin, the cello, the french horn, the clarinet, and the bass tuba. I had drum sticks and a trombone. Mama sang and she played the piano, which she had taught herself to do.

But Mama had a special instrument which she played for me, often on my request. What I called the "duqq" or "duuq-duuq" ("knock, knock"), was a wooden bowl and mallet used to pulverize seeds, spices, and coffee beans. By beating the mallet first against the bottom and then against the side she created a darbáikki-like rhythm suitable for the dákäki or accompaniment of a song.

Mama sang constantly. Heekît-ni "al-t-alifoon kill

25 Until I started editing this book, I never realized that my grandfather had also delighted in this music. In trying to determine why I should have been particularly attracted to this rhythmic music, I decided it is because of the special emphasis Mama placed on it: it was the intensity with which she played, the infectiousness of her smile. It was as if she knew she could mesmerize one by making this music.
yawm marra, kill yawm marra... ("Speak to me on the telephone, every day, once everyday, once") was one of our favorite songs.

I never failed to delight in her singing, and unlike my own children, never once felt embarrassment at a singing parent. She made it seem that singing was a natural thing to do.

When I starting dating Sharon, it was no small attraction to me that she sang so beautifully. I guess Mama the Musician set it up.

Abe J. Bassett
When we would take a trip Mama would bring out her book of songs and begin singing. Papa loved to hear Mama sing but he could not carry a tune. One song I remember:

'ibri lī wiqūt fi-l-bīr
'āma shāaf khuzuq kbiir
atrash simī ranīt-ha
ākhras qaal malī tha kthīr.

My needle fell into the well,
A blind man saw its big eye,
A deaf man heard it ringing,
A dumb man said it was very nice.

Selma Bassett Edinger
She Taught Me A Song

Back in the early 50's, when I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I would spend the summers in Charleston, often passing though Columbus. On one occasion, I drove Khalti Rahija with me from Columbus to Charleston to visit my mother.

On the way, in the car as we were driving through those West Virginia hills, she would sing Lebanese songs. One of them I mastered, *ah yaa 'asmar-il-lawn* ("Oh, olive-skinned one!")

One of the students in my Lebanese-Arabic class was a professor of music, the University carillonneur, who transcribed the song for the Arabic class, and occasionally would play it on the University carillon.

Ernest McCarus
Mama the Traveler

Mama had a child-like exuberance for life: she loved to meet new people, see old friends, go to parties, travel, and experience new things. It was only natural that she should come to visit Sharon and me and our children when we lived in Missouri, North Dakota, and Washington.

I particularly remember a ten-day visit to Tacoma. I arranged to have day-long trips balanced with close-to-home activities. There was a trip to Mt. Rainier, then to Olympic peninsula, and then to the daffodil and flower fields in Puyallup, to Olympia and the fish hatchery, and to Seattle.

It was a joy to show the area to Mom because each view of Mt. Ranier or Puget Sound, or each unique flower or new tree, was greeted with wide-eyed delight and joy. She was constantly amazed, enthralled, captivated, by both nature and things man-made. She thoroughly enjoyed every moment of every day on that visit, capping each day’s activities by recording the events in her diary.

It made her visit with us joyful and welcome.

Abe J. Bassett
Mama Was A Party Girl

Mama could be tired or emotionally down, but whenever there was an up-coming event, she found the energy to cook a special dish, dress up, put on makeup, and go out. It might have been a church service, an Eastern Star meeting, a trip to the store, or a visit at a friend’s house.

I often said to her, “Mama, you’re a party girl, you love to go out.” She never denied it.

Abe J. Bassett
Mama was visiting me when Paul was about 3 years old and Clay was 18 months old. She was making khubz marquuq. As she threw the dough on the oven rack to bake, Paul said, “Sitti’s playing baseball.” She giggled.

Crocheted Houses

The last time Mama visited me in California, we were driving into the city of San Francisco. We passed some tracts of houses built tightly together with common walls. She looked at them and commented, “That looks like crochet work.”

Lorraine Bassett Scott
Rahija and family; top, 1931; bottom, 1943
At times Mama rued her Americanization. She used to lament that when she came to Pikeville they put her in a corset, and she never felt she needed one. As a child, when I was still allowed into Mama’s boudoir, I watched her struggling to lace her corset, and I was in full agreement with her lament.

We have a splendid photograph of Mama in a fine embroidered dress with her hand resting on a parasol; a hat finished the portrait of a very elegant and beautiful young lady. I suppose a corset contributed to the straight back.

Abe J. Bassett
This is a story that Mama told many times. When she was visiting me in California, I took her to visit a shop with imports from Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries. We saw a beautiful, wine-colored, velvet dress from Lebanon. I wanted to buy it for her, but she refused. She said that she would never wear it, so we went home. Early the next morning, while I was still sleeping, she tapped me on the shoulder and woke me up, saying "Honey, I want to go get the dress." I was delighted and still wanted to buy it for her, but she called home and Gladys or Selma sent some of her money. We bought the dress and it became her trademark at the annual Kfeirian Reunion, with Mama wearing the dress when she danced.
Rahija dancing in her maroon dress. A painting from a photograph taken at a Kfeirian Reunion, c. 1978
Memories Of

The Dress

Once, when Mama was with Lorraine in California, she visited a store selling Arabic items and clothes, where she saw a lovely maroon Arabic dress, decorated in gold. Mama wanted this dress and telephoned me to send money from her account, and I did.

She wore the dress to banquets, to reunions, and even to the Episcopal Church while carrying the chalice down the aisle to the altar. She looked very festive and was appreciated by many. She danced at many a banquet in her maroon dress with a glass of water on her head.

Selma Bassett Edinger
When I was in Okinawa I purchased several yards of very fine green silk brocade to be made into a dress for Mama. She had the material made into a skirt and jacket and it was a handsome outfit. For the next thirty-five years, she wore this suit for special occasions.

I think she loved this dress because the material was beautiful, the dress was elegant, she looked attractive in the outfit, and her son had purchased the material.

Abe J. Bassett
Memories Of

Rahija, circa 1972
This is a story about my mother’s love of flowers and plants, which you would find everywhere in and around the house. One day I decided to count her plants in pots; there were 80! It was hard to believe, so I counted them again. She had lots of pots throughout the house: in the kitchen, at the windows, on the back or front porches, or on the ground.

She enjoyed the challenge of growing plants that were difficult or exotic to grow, such as figs, blue grapes, a type of kumquat, jasmine, a shrimp plant, and a trumpet flower—hard to grow, but beautiful. I don’t know how she got the fig tree to grow in Ohio’s northern climate, but she did, and she delighted in showing-off her home-grown figs. A very interesting achievement.

She once planted a small lily of the valley, because she heard me say I liked them. Mama grew vines that reached over the garage roof and she had vines with a lovely shade of purple flowers on the neighbor’s fence, which is why I grew fond of that color.

To increase the number and variety of plants she would frequently cut a slip from someone else’s plant, and grow them in pots. Seeking a plant she did not have, no garden plot was safe, especially an abandoned yard, where no one lived.
One day I took Mama to the east side of town to visit Regina Rahall’s mother. In the living room was a large plant as tall as the room. Mama was entranced. We visited for an hour and still Mama did not ask for a slip. I had my fingers crossed. But before we left, Mama asked for a slip. The answer was “Sorry, cutting a slip will kill this plant.”

A neat way to say no. Mama got very few “no’s.” Yet she understood.

Gladys Shumla Bassett Parlette
Mama loved flowers and trees. One day when she was riding with my husband, Bill, and me, we passed a tree whose leaves had a blue-green tinge. Mama said "A blue tree — a blue tree! If I were driving and I saw a blue tree, I would stop." Needless to say, we stopped.

Lorraine Bassett Scott
Mama loved plants. One day an exotic plant, an oriental spice bush, caught her eye with its beauty and her nose with its smell. She pulled off a stem with a flower, was caught by the gardener, but allowed to keep the slip which she planted. Even today the plant still grows.

Her prized plant was a fig tree planted in the back yard of her second Columbus house. To protect it from the harsh Ohio winters, she carefully wrapped it in the fall and unwrapped it in the spring. The tree bore fruit which amazed everyone since the fig tree grew much farther north than anyone thought possible. We ate figs every summer.

Once in California, she came upon fig trees used as a border around a house. She went up to the door to ask the owner if she could have a fig. The lady of the house did not even know that she had figs growing. Mama got her figs.

Selma Bassett Edinger
A Nose for Vines

Mama had a nose for grape vines.

Whenever she visited me, hardly any time passed before she went for a walk with an empty grocery bag under her arm. In a short while she would return with a bag full of grape leaves. "Mom," I would say, "where did you get those grape leaves?"

"Oh, down the street at the blue house."

"But, did you ask?"

"Oh, it's okay, they won't mind."

Abe J. Bassett

They'll Never Miss 'em

One day Mama and I were walking around the block. She saw a neighbor's flowering bush and she walked over and picked two or three blossoms off the bush.

I said, "Mama, you can't do that. It's really against the law."

"Oh, it's alright, honey. They'll never miss 'em."

Lorraine Bassett Scott
Returning from Army service in 1954, I spent the summer in Columbus.

I worked in the Towne Tavern and did maintenance at the house. Cutting the grass in the back yard was a most tedious chore, not only because of the summer heat and the size of the yard, but because it was done with a push-reel mower. Mama must have been appreciative of my work because she would bring me a large glass of lemonade to cool me down and to replace the fluids I had sweated away. I was certainly appreciative of this kindness.

We had had no fresh vegetables in Okinawa, and I had an insatiable craving for salads that summer. Mama made me a huge bowl of salad every day, and by mid-summer I was eating tomatoes and onions and cucumbers from her garden. I couldn't get enough, and I loved every bite of it...all ten thousand bites of it!
Rahija Read the Recipes

My mother Rahija was a very talented person. Even though she did not have the education she wanted, she still achieved many things. She learned crocheting and embroidery and her finished work was always artistic and beautiful.

She was a wonderful cook learning many American recipes. I once asked how she learned so many American recipes; she already had a large number of Arabic recipes.

Mom said, "I read the recipes."

"I didn’t know you could read English," I said. She said her learning came from reading the recipes and using the newspapers to increase her English.

Gladys Shumla Bassett Parlette
Mama used to tell us stories, wonderful stories, about growing up in the old country and seeing camels, and of course, her favorite story about being chased by camels. Mom would tease the camel by saying, *wizz, 'aynnik, fil-qaadūus, fi-l-minnshaár.*

Because of these stories, I began to repeat them to my friend Katie. One day she said to me, "Gladys, I want to show you something." We went to a store window and there was a Mama camel, relaxed with her baby laying cuddled against her.

I have loved camels all my life.

Gladys Shumla Bassett Parlette
A Happy Time

I remember Mama when she was younger and we lived in Williamson. It was usual for all of us to get up early to go for a long walk before breakfast. It was great!

I also remember that each one of us girls—Gladys, Selma, Wadad, Alice and Lorraine, (and Abe, too)—learned to play the piano and other instruments. Our wonderful mother played the piano and we all sang. She taught us how to play the piano and later how to sing. We sang so many lovely songs all the time. Then later, she taught us how to dance the Lebanese dance called the dabkiyab. It was interesting and fun.

During all these beautiful days and years our lovely mother Rahija cooked the best food ever: all sorts of Lebanese food, especially home-made bread, and spinach fataayir (diamond-shaped). It was our favorite. She also taught us to make kibbi and yabruq (stuffed grape leaves) and other Lebanese food.

Then one day Dad decided to sell the store in Williamson and we moved to Columbus. Even though we missed all our friends in our dear Williamson, we moved to "Beautiful Ohio" and loved it.

It was the greatest and happiest days for mother Rahija as she had a large back yard with many
beautiful flowers. I recall that Aunt Della came to our home to visit, and so did Uncle Jasper and Uncle Sam and Aunt Maheba. All were so happy for the new move for our mother, Rahija. It was a happy reunion.

Our late father, Abraham, helped originate the Kfeirian Reunion. Mama was very happy at the reunion; she loved to dance.

This is how I remember my mother, Rahija Saad Bassett. It was all a happy time, everyday.

Wadad Ethyl Bassett Bofysil
Mama's Long Wash Day

Monday was wash day and Tuesday was ironing day when I was a child. All six children lived at home until my sisters started going to college. Until Alice went to college, we were all home during the summer.

The amount of washing to be done was truly prodigious. Laundry was done in the basement, and I recall the two washing machines we owned in Williamson. The first had inverted brass-bowl plungers that pushed the clothes down into the water. It was replaced by a more modern Maytag with its twisting rotor. There were three tubs that contained rinse water, and each piece of laundry had to be wrung through rubber rollers as it went from one tub to the other.

Sometimes Mama or one of my sisters would get their hands caught in the wringer, and it took a deft move by Mama to hit the safety release lever on top. Once done, the hand could be extracted.

In spite of this modern convenience, Mama had a wash board which she used occasionally for some stubborn piece of dirty clothing. The heavy baskets of damp clothes were carried outside and hung on lines in the back yard. After the clothes dried they were returned to the basement for ironing.

Tuesday was ironing day, and it was equally long and arduous, even after Papa bought Mama a
mangle for shirts and flatware. I was about seven or eight years old and I remember the talk and anticipation about the mangle, and later, the disappointment that this modern labor saving device still required a lot of human toil.

The washing and ironing were done in the basement, and the basement could only be accessed through a trap door in the kitchen floor. The door was too heavy for a boy to lift and the steps too steep for a child to be trusted near. These steps were the path to the clothes lines in the back yard, and they were the steps to the second floor bedrooms, the destination of ironed shirts and sheets, clean towels, and clothing.

Mondays and Tuesdays were always long, long days, and even as a child I seemed to know that Mama had to work very hard on those days.

Abe J. Bassett
Learning Arabic

By the time I was in graduate school at Ohio State and living on the third floor of Mama’s house, I really wanted to learn Arabic.

“Speak to me in Arabic, Mama,” I would implore her, and she would try. But by this time in her life, Mama had difficulty in speaking 100% Arabic. Her speech was truly half-Arabic and half-English. This was demonstrated one day when I knocked on the bathroom door and Mama, who was inside, responded with “Anii, Honey” (“It’s me, Honey.”)

Abe J. Bassett
In Arlington, Mama had a parakeet named Prince. She patiently worked with the bird to teach him to speak until the bird could say several words in English and Arabic.

When Alan was a baby, Prince was allowed to fly in the room, once landing on Alan’s play pen, where he started saying boos ("kiss"). Hearing the command, Alan went to the bird to give him a kiss.

Selma Bassett Edinger
Mama loved her parakeets. She talked to them and they talked back to her. Through the years, she had many birds because they died or flew away.

One day Bill Scott, who had a good ear for languages and had picked up some basic Arabic phrases, came into the house. Mama’s bird Prince had just flown away, and Mom was in tears. “My Prince has flown away,” she cried to Bill, “and do you know what he said to me before he left?”

Without missing a beat, Bill responded with an appropriate Arabic phrase, *Anii bshuufik?* (“I’ll be seeing you?”)
Strolling With Sitti

The sun is warm and comfortable; the air cool on my face and arms. Sitti is pushing me in my stroller along the sidewalk on our daily stroll. We move along leisurely; down the curb, across the street, up the curb, past bushes that are still there today, and up to a house I remember being in front of before.

Sitti stops and I look over to see a smiling man with no hair on top of his head coming down toward us from the porch. I hear them talk and hear the smiles in their voices. I feel safe and I like this man. Then we move on to continue our walk.

These are the reflections of a two-year old memory. I may have been younger, but whatever the age this one memory epitomizes Sitti as I remember:

her trust in and her love of people;
her joy of the earth and all its wondrous attributes, and the beauty of it all.

These qualities God has imbued within us all in this one small memory which has sustained me throughout my life. My Sitti imparted her love of life to me.

Mitchell Parlette
A Kiss For Sitti

One special memory I have of Sitti is when I learned to say anii baddi boosi ("I want a kiss.") Sitti’s face lit up and she gave me a big hug and kiss.

One year my family and I went to the reunion where Sitti danced with a glass on her head. I remember thinking how neat that was and how complicated.

She was a very strong woman. I’m sorry I wasn’t older to really remember her well and to appreciate all her fine qualities.

Valerie Bassett Cundiff
Memories Of

Tiny Tears

When I was seven, Sitti was visiting and decided to make my Tiny Tears doll a dress. The fabric was white with brown polka dots. The doll was fatter than she expected so she exclaimed and chuckled and added an extra panel in the back. I stood at her elbow and watched the whole process. I still have that doll in that dress.26

On the same trip she couldn't get over my odd length pants: "bedal bushers." Of course I remember her dancing around our living room with a glass of water on her head. She made bread and was momentarily set back by the electric oven—the element was in the way! Not like the smooth oven floor of her gas oven.

I remember getting boxes of goodies for Christmas: *khubz*, *ma’mool*, *laban* and more, from Sitti’s kitchen. What a treat was this labor of love!

Nancy Rutherford Griffith

26 I'd like to know if the dolls for Nancy and Martha are still good, because I'd like to sew two dresses for them...Now, don't say anything—I want to send two dollars to Nancy for her birthday. Let Nancy save them in her bank. And every time I send money for a child for his birthday, that doesn't mean that you have to send me anything—I'm just saying thank you and that's all." [Letter to Alice Bassett Rutherford, February, 1956]
My Exotic Grandmother

I vaguely remember Sitti visiting us in California, and I remember her patiently enduring various family get togethers in restaurants and relatives’ homes. At these places I’m sure the wonderful stories of the old country were told.

But my most vivid memories of Sitti are in her 132 East 11th Avenue house, where she seemed most at ease, allowing me glimpses into her daily life.

My first memory of Sitti was when our family went to Ohio in 1967, when I was 11. It was our first trip east of the Mississippi, and everything about the place was new and different. This, no doubt, helped imprint so clearly these first impressions of my Lebanese grandmother.

Everything she did seemed exotic—like making lemonade on that humid summer day using bottled lemon juice instead of frozen concentrate. Or showing us a bottle of rosewater. Although I can’t remember what she used rosewater for, I do remember discussing it, and tentatively tasting the rose petal she brought from her garden. Even the bird in her kitchen seemed exotic, a Mediterranean touch.

A lot of my memories of that trip are centered in the kitchen, naturally. I remember her opening the refrigerator and pulling out a big cast iron frying
pan filled with yabraq. I remember us all crowded around the kitchen, watching her make khubz marquuq, seeing the bread dough magically grow as she tossed it back and forth between her arms. We had some bright lights shining on her so we could take pictures, which added to the sense of magic and festivity.

I remember us out on the porch that day, sitting together on the vinyl-covered couch that rocked. How neat it was to a California girl to be on a porch, in a porch swing, while it was still warm outside in the evening. Another time it was morning, and I remember a woman her age who lived in the neighborhood walked by. I enjoyed listening to them exchange pleasantries. It was the only time I saw her interact with a non-family member. It enabled me to see her for a moment as a person other than as an exotic grandmother.

I loved being in her room, amongst the geraniums on the window sill and all the wonderful family pictures on the wall. Although I saw Sitti another 10 times or so after our first visit in 1967, the visits to the house were only to take her somewhere else. I would always try to visit those pictures in her room, however, even if I had to sneak up the stairs to do so.

Jan Rutherford Bush
You Like Lebanese Food, Honey?

When we visited Columbus when I was just of high school age (1967), we arrived at 132 East llth at lunch time. After hugs and exclamations, Sitti asked us, her California grandchildren, "What do you want to eat for lunch? Roast beef sandwiches?" I thought, "What?! No Lebanese food?"

When we got inside I asked her a tentative question about her cooking. With surprise and delight she said, "You like Lebanese food, honey?" showing me the kitchen which had the delicious results of many hours of cooking. Later that trip I was making recipe notes which pleased her but also frustrated her. "How much? I don't know, honey, this much," she'd say, gesturing with her hands.

The other day I was in a locally owned grocery store which has a large scale. After I weighed myself, an elderly lady made a friendly comment. I said I needed to lose some weight. She said, "You look fine, honey," with confidence. This little exchange, in the light of thinking about Sitti, made me realize that I have a positive prejudice for little old ladies hovering around five feet tall and stockily built, especially those of "peasant stock," who call me "honey." Around my area they're mostly Italian and Greek. But as fond of them as I am, it makes me sad to think they may become extinct.

Nancy Rutherford Griffith
How I loved Sitti’s Lebanese food!

I have fond memories of receiving packages of special treats at holiday times. One summer we went to Columbus to visit Sitti. It was at mealtime and she said that she had nothing to eat. Shortly thereafter, we learned that she had meant that she had nothing to eat except Lebanese food! When we learned this, we begged her to let us feast on all those epicurean delights!

It’s a shame that we children didn’t have more contact with Sitti; so many miles separated us. When she did visit or when we visited her I can remember lessons in Arabic and in Arabic bread making. How I wish I had mastered both!

Martha de la Soujeole
Wrinkles and White Hair

When I was sixteen, during August of 1972, I returned to Columbus by myself. I think this was the only time I actually spent the night in Sitti’s house. This was also the first and maybe the only time I was able to spend some time alone with Sitti.

One morning, Sitti let me take a picture of her in the living room. I moved the couch and positioned her so that half her face was lit up from the sunlight shining through the lace curtains. This highlighted her wrinkles, which I loved. Her white hair was braided down the back, and she let me move the braid to one side so that this too was highlighted by the sun. She also let me photograph her wrinkled hands, laughing and protesting a little, but not really minding.

Jan Rutherford Bush
I remember one time in May of 1975, Jeff (now my husband) and I stopped in Columbus on our way back to California from college.

I had always referred to Rahija as Sitti, and Jeff, who had met her once or twice a few years before, assumed it was her first name. So as we each walked in through the screen door, we said “Hi, Sitti” as our greeting. Sitti laughed delightedly, exclaiming over and over, “He called me Sitti!” giggling at the thought of this young male stranger calling her “grandmother.”

Jeff was completely perplexed—“What did I say?” he muttered to me. I, on the other hand, was a tad miffed at the idea that she was more interested in this “grandson” than her actual granddaughter.
The Definition of Angel

I have many memories of Sitti Rahija.

Of all the grandchildren, I had the fortune to be raised by Sitti. She repeated her stories so many times that they become confused with my own memories. Sitti fattened me with her cooking. My lunch through the end of high school was Arabic. My life was embellished by everything Sitti. All the memories that my cousins share of their Sitti are true. She was the definition of "Angel." Every situation was a delight with her.

Sitti had an easy way with people. Living beside the Ohio State campus she came in contact with many students. As I became older I realized that many students in the area knew her face. We would walk up the street to go shopping and people would greet her. I was always amazed at the number of people who knew her. More students knew my grandmother than knew me!

They would always seem to be locating new cachets of grape leaves for her. Once we passed a young man's apartment on the way home from school. He said he saw grape leaves for my grandmother. He said he was fed up to see the landlord tearing Sitti's prized "weeds" down. He then took it upon himself to find a replacement for her.

Sitti and I would walk to High Street to shop a
couple of times a week. If she had an eye for a particular luxury, she would try to bargain the price down. The American shop owners didn’t know the give and take strategies of bargaining. One item became an obsession with her, an oriental carpet. The store owner gave her an inflated price, and she countered with an equally deflated price. Twice a week she would walk to his store and ask him the price of the rug and twice a week he would say, “I tell her the same price!”

Over a month passed and the rug didn’t sell. “What’s the price of that rug?” she would ask. “Ma’am the price is (whatever it was). If I couldn’t sell that rug, I would lower the price.”

He must have broken down because he finally sold the rug to her at her price.
My grandmother, Rahija, taught me to have pride in my family name. Sitti was the honorary guest at our family gatherings; she was responsible for bringing us together.

Thanks to my cousin Matthew, who in the late seventies persuaded me to attend the annual Kfeirian Reunion, I grew to know and understand my heritage. I had special appreciation for Sitti when she would do her famous dance with the glass of water perched precariously on her head. Everyone commented appreciatively, and I felt proud.

After attending 48 or 49 reunions, the year of the 50th reunion—the golden reunion of reunions—was the year she was unable to attend. This upset me greatly, the fact that she attended the first reunion and was so close to the fiftieth, and we couldn’t bring her. I wanted to find a way to make her spirit and memory present for all to remember.

At the Grand Ball on Sunday evening, with 700 people in attendance—the largest crowd in reunion history—Matthew and I asked to make a special announcement about Sitti. As we approached the microphone, my eyes almost began to water and my composure just about vanished. As soon as I starting speaking, a special power from within me took control.
With the image of Sitti in my heart, it seemed that every word carried power and love, every sentence conjured vivid images of her presence. I recall saying to the audience:

*It is a time to rejoice and put aside sorrow. Sitti cannot be here but I have seen her love and happiness in the eyes of all our children here and her spirit is in them. She has succeeded in her goal to unite us all. Thanks to Matthew and Selma for helping me bring Sitti to this reunion one more night. God bless Rahija Saad Bassett——God bless everyone!*

At that instant, Matthew and I uncovered the large portrait of Sitti in her traditional reunion dress, dancing with a glass of water on her head. At that same moment, the lights returned and I could see everyone looking at her portrait, I felt proud like never before.

As I began to leave the stage, several gentlemen near me had tears in their eyes as they shook my hand. Remembering Rahija had touched them all. The moment has always remained with me.

Douglas Kinnaird Bassett
Because Sitti was from the "Holy Land," she did not always distinguish between biblical and secular stories. It all happened in her back yard.

"That's where Jesus took on the Devil," she would say, gesturing toward the Mount Hermon of her memory. "If you bow to me, I'll give you everything," said the Devil. "But what do you think Jesus said? 'Get away, Devil! Get out of here!'"

Another story might begin in the more recent past, such as the one that has become part of the canon of family folklore: "Three men came from Palestine, riding camels. They were Muslims, but we gave them hospitality..."

I used to think that Sitti overly romanticized village life in the Kfeir of her childhood, that she dwelt on nostalgic memories of long summer days eating figs and grapes. But then I realized that she also told us stories of divorce and addiction to araq, of communal and domestic violence, of drudgery and loneliness, of women dying in childbirth while their husbands in America tried to survive as itinerant peddlers.

It's just that she described everything in the same calm tone. It was all part of the human experience.

Clay Scott
Mama frequently told the story of how, as a young child of three or four in Kfeir, when she was sick and not feeling well, she asked her mother to wipe her nose. The request earned her a slap across the face.

It always seemed to me that Mama never understood the reason for the rebuke from her mother, but blamed herself.

The story was never told as a story with a moral, but as a sad moment in her life.

Abe J. Bassett
Papa was a practical joker and often the joke was at the expense of Mama.

One of the stories she frequently told me was the time Papa came home late at night and came into her room. She awoke with a start when Papa dangled his socks before her nose.

In remembering the story now, it seems to me that Mama told it in mock-horror, mock-disgust, almost admitting she enjoyed sharing Abraham’s delight even when it was at her expense.

Abe J. Bassett
Once when I was in high school, Mama took ill. Our doctor—a man we believed in—discovered that Mama was anemic and prescribed a daily small glass of wine.

Until this time, Mama did not take alcohol in any form. Papa unsuccessfully coaxed her to take a drink on special occasions. But now, Mama did as the doctor ordered and found she could tolerate wine if it was a sweet wine, like Mogen David.

Once we decided to make our own wine. Papa brought home bags of grapes—purple concord—and dumped them into a large tub. We girls washed our feet and stomped away, mashing the grapes to pulp. The juice was allowed to ferment, was bottled and we enjoyed the wine.

After that, Mama learned to sip wine a bit.

Gladys Bassett Parlette
Mama had a thing for well water.

Whenever we were traveling and Mama spotted a well, be it in the country or in a village, she asked Abraham to stop, which he did without argument. Mama and Papa would take the cup and sample the water, announcing that this was indeed fine water, inviting Lorraine and me to partake.

Once when we were in eastern West Virginia, the well water had a particularly strong sulphurous smell. I couldn’t possibly get close enough to the water to taste it, the smell alone repelled me. But Mama took the water, pronounced it fit, and drank heartily.

Part of the attraction must have been the notion that if it tasted bad, it must be good for you. The evidence in that idea was the castor oil they poured down our throats when we complained of being ill.

It was much later in my life that I realized that Mom’s love of country wells and water was an important link to the ayn of Kfeir and her childhood home.

Abe J. Bassett
Our daughter’s wedding to Sitti’s son, Abraham Joseph Bassett, was June 20, 1959. I had not met his mother until this day. I was looking forward to meeting her. A few fears nagged at the back of my mind knowing Abe was the last born and only son of Sitti—and Sharon was my only daughter. After more than thirty years, I know my fears were groundless. Sitti was an unusual mother-in-law. She let everyone solve their own problems. Never have I known anyone so caring for all people, no criticizing of anyone and so loving to children.

She talked of her early life in Lebanon—and told an interesting story when she was a young teenager; she took fresh lamb to market for her father. She described the clothing she wore and how the dust scattered around her bare feet as she walked in Lebanon. I can just see her.

I had the pleasure of visiting her in her home many times and eating many Lebanese dinners. The whole family cooked different gourmet casseroles. It was a tasty dinner and could the Bassett family entertain!

While the pots were bubbling, Sitti would place a glass of water on her head and dance to a Lebanese record. I wish we had a video of her dances.

She tended her herb garden and had flowers blooming in every spare corner. It was a time for
everyone to enjoy, and I am so happy to have met such a wonderful friend.

Sitti comes from Lebanon and I come from the Kentucky hills. It was amazing how we shared the same attitudes and sentiments for living.

Corta Smyth Kinnaird
A Last Instruction

I was going off to war to the Far East; exact destination unknown, but Korea was probable. My home leave was done and now it was time to report to the California army base for assignment and transportation.

Mama fed me a last summer luncheon, and we talked. Then, lunch was done and it was time to call a cab to 2015 Tremont Road for the trip to Port Columbus. When the cab came, I gave Mom a kiss and hug, said goodbye, picked up my duffle bag, and entered the cab.

It was a sad moment and Mom was worried about her only son going off to war, perhaps never to return. I rolled down the cab window to say one last “goodbye” and the cab began moving slowly away, as if the driver knew that he should linger. Looking back, I saw Mama running after me for one last important instruction as she shouted through her tears, “And, Abie,” she cried, “don’t bring home a Japanese girl.”

Abe J. Bassett
She Was Authentic

My most vivid memory of Sitti was that she never changed.

I first met her in 1945 and last saw her in 1977, over 32 years later. This would cover a period from age 54 to age 86. There was almost no change during that time, except for a little aging. She was just as authentically Lebanese at the end as at the beginning. The experiences of her youth in a Lebanese village on the road to Damascus and her experience emigrating to the United States were indelibly etched on her mind. Very little of her experience living in the United States had much effect on her basic way of thinking. Because of this, and having heard her stories many times, they are indelibly etched on my mind also. I hope that someday the situation in Lebanon permits tourists to go there. It would be fascinating to see her homeland for myself.

She was interesting to me not only because she was the first person from the Near East that I had met, but also as a contrast to my own father, who came as an immigrant from Ireland in almost the same year and at about the same age. He almost turned his back on his early years in Ireland and hardly ever talked about it. There was very little of the old country left in him. Of course, this is partly due to his being a man, and of necessity out of
working in the American scene instead of being a woman living mostly at home or with Lebanese friends. Mr. Bassett was certainly much more Americanized than Sitti. But I think Sitti's own attitude was the big factor.

Certainly I will never forget Sitti and will remember her fondly. She was authentic.

Jack W. Rutherdale, Jr.
Nostalgia

My sisters and I regret that we couldn't have arranged to have Mama return to Lebanon for a visit. Mama was very nostalgic about her childhood home and yearned deeply to return. She needed, as everyone needs, a chance to contact the early part of her life. She wanted to see her house, to drink at the ayn, to walk to the school, to pick a fig or grape, to see a goat or sheep on the hillside, to view Jabal el Shaykh, to visit the folks still alive, and to meet their children and grandchildren.

When I was growing up, I thought many times I would like Mama to return for a visit, but I dismissed the thought for the same reason that Mama did. We never thought it possible. She still thought of the trip as a three to four week ordeal. Days of walking, days of waiting, days of train rides, a week at sea. The voyage was too difficult and too expensive for us to seriously consider it.
Mama would not allow me to say any "dirty" or "bad" words, which is why I was so shocked about her "swearing."

When she hurt herself, she would shriek out an Arabic phrase, which I knew was swearing, because it sounded like swearing. "Yihraq 'id-lish-shaytaan!" she shrieked while I shuddered.

It was only years later that I had the nerve to ask her for a translation, which was, literally, "May the Devils’ hand be burned!"

What Has He Come To?

When I was in college I studied psychology and philosophy and was given to espousing weighty ideas.

One time, Mama got a sudden and horrible insight. She stopped, stared at me with a half-disappointed and half-perplexed look, and with a sad voice, asked, "Abie, are you a Communist?"
Great Tones of Happiness

When I think of Aunt Rahija, I think of a lady who was always smiling and reflecting great tones of happiness. She was always warm and a pleasure to be with. She loved life and was devoted to her family and wanted to share that love with all of her relatives, young and old.

On this occasion of celebrating her 100th birthday, I pray that God would rest her soul in peace.

Ramez McCarus
Mama shares with almost all Arab women the desire to see that you are well-fed. No, it is more than that, it is a desire to stuff you with wonderful food. Regardless of how much one ate, she was sure to offer a second, a third, or even a fourth helping. It made no difference how frequently or strongly you protested, the offer for more food was certain to come.

I could never break her of this custom, although all my life I tried. Once I pleaded with her, "Mom, look, I have been to war, I have a doctor's degree, I have a wife and two children, I am 46 years old. Don't you think I know when I am hungry?"

"Okay, Honey," she said, "I understand. I will leave you alone."

And then after a suitable pause she asked, baddak baqlaawa? Baddak qahwi? ("Want some baklawa? Want some coffee?")

Abe J. Bassett

11A traditional welcoming to partake of the feast.
When I would visit Williamson, I saw all the families, but special to me was the Bassett family. I knew Rahija very well. After the Bassetts moved to Columbus, I visited them often and was glad to know Mama was closer to Oak Harbor.

One thing that Mama would do that I remember so well, was when she would dance with a glass of water on her head.

I visited her at the hospital until she passed away. I still visit the daughters in Columbus and California.

Visiting them all was always a pleasure.
May 26, 1980, Rahija’s 89th birthday
She Outwitted the Camel

The last time I saw Sitti before her stroke was on May 26, 1980, her 89th birthday.

She was dressed in her fancy silk dress and was in great spirits. Sitti, my aunts, my cousins and their girlfriends and I went to a restaurant. Because we mistakenly parked on the other side of the mall, there was a considerably long walk from the parking lot to the restaurant.

As Sitti hooked her arm in mine and trudged along with the rest of us, I remember being amazed at the stamina and spirit of this immigrant woman — no wonder she outran and outwitted that camel 80 odd years earlier!

Jan Rutherford Bush
Selma and Khalti came to visit Mother and to attend the Kfeirian Board of Directors meeting in Charleston.

Khalti was her great usual self, friendly, strong, and smiling. She said her neck was sore and bothered her on the way here that day and we were all thinking it was probably hurting from sitting, head drooping over, which happens to most front seat passengers. There was no importance put to it.

Selma and I went to the meeting and Harry stayed at home. He told me that their visit Saturday evening was the best time the two sisters ever had. Khalti played the piano, downstairs in our hall, while talking to mother, upstairs in her bed, back and forth to each other. Khalti played American and Arabic music, they both sang together, remembering music and words, having a wonderful time.

Later when Khalti was upstairs with mother, they talked and laughed and relieved their childhood memories all during the evening.

When Selma and I returned everyone was happy and it seemed nothing at all was wrong. Khalti and Selma slept next door at Apt E, which was then our “guest house.” Also spending the evening there
were Harry’s brother David Zegeer of Lexington and his wife Louise. Harry and I didn’t see or talk to them till next morning when we got a call.

Khalti was in the bathroom, taking her shower. Selma began to wonder why she was there as long as she was. Upon checking, she found Khalti sitting on the floor outside the tub. Selma called Louise, who taught nursing at the University of Kentucky, and Louise examined her, ruling out a heart attack. Khalti had had a stroke! We called an ambulance, which took Khalti to emergency. I called my fabulous doctor, Al Pfister. Khalti was in hospital for three weeks before going back to Columbus.

All I know is what Doctor Pfister told me: the neck cords atrophied, just literally wore out, and that’s what happened, causing the stroke and paralysis.

Mary Frances Zegeer
My final memory of Mama was while she was in the hospital during her last days. I flew to Columbus as often as I could, to be with her and to cheer her. I would talk to her about putting herself into God’s hands and everything would be alright. I was stroking her forehead. She took my wrist with her one hand that she could move and squeezed it tightly while her forehead’s expression told me not to worry. She was still being my mom.

Lorraine Bassett Scott
Memories Of

A Free Spirit

After Mama’s funeral we had a wonderfully warm and loving remembrance for Mama in the basement of Trinity Episcopal Church in Columbus. We saw slide pictures of Mama and listened to her tape recorded voice telling her favorite stories.

At the conclusion, Sharon, Corta (my mother-in-law), Douglas, Valerie and I returned to our home in Dayton. When we walked into the family room, there was a sparrow flying around the room. Involuntarily, but immediately, I quietly exclaimed “That’s Mama!”

Corta was startled by my comment, but I knew what I knew. We opened the door allowing the bird to fly away.

Abe J. Bassett
Abraham, age 63, and Rahija, age 57, among flowers at home, 2015 Tremont Road, Columbus, Ohio, in the summer of 1948.
Rahija Bassett
Writing in her diary
on the occasion the death of her husband.
March 28, 1949

My dear husband Ibrahiim,

He became sick at 12 o’clock Sunday morning in great distress, and after an hour he was seized by paralysis and was unable to speak at all. We and the doctor were at his side the whole time, while he was in bed in our room at home. After three o’clock he was no longer aware of anything, and he expired at four-thirty in the afternoon.

Sunday and Monday, he stayed in the house, and a lot of flowers came, and telephone calls, and letters, and there were a lot of people—Americans and Syrians. His services were dignified, and the day of the burial was sunny. They buried him before a rainy day—the next day it rained.

God rest your soul my darling Ibrahim, you who loved so much your wife Rahija, and your children, and your family, and God, and the world.
Back row, Della, Jaspar, Rahija
Seated, Sam, Maheba
Columbus, Ohio, 1952
Mama Rahija Jamra Saad was born to Numnum Jamra and Asseef Saad on May 26, 1891 in what is now Kfeir, Lebanon, but was then a part of Syria and the Ottoman Empire.

Numnum and Asseef, the village butcher, had five children, two boys and three girls, and in order they were Maheba (b. 1881, married George Kerbawy), Sam (b. 1884, married Muntaha), Jasper (b. 1887, married Clara Sword), Rahija (married Abraham Joseph Bassett), and Della (b. 1895, married Nasseph McCarus).

Rahija went to school to learn Arabic and Russian in a school staffed with Russian teachers, or teachers who could speak some Russian. These may have been Russian Orthodox teachers. What Mama remembered of the Russian language was *rus, vow, rus, vow* ("right, left, right, left"). Mama was a good student, and learned to read the Bible to her grandfather. She continued to read the

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27Rahija frequently read passages from the Bible to her grandfather. Asseef's father lived in a single room which was part of a house. Rahija entered his room from the street. He was sickly, walked with a cane, and was almost bed-ridden. He could not read, but enjoyed listening to the Bible. Rahija recalls that he coughed a lot, and as she approached the house she could hear him coughing and wheezing. One day, on her
Bible all her life. She learned to write and put her knowledge to work by keeping books and accounts of daily sales of her father’s meat sales.

Numnum died when Rahija was in the third grade, and her father Asseef, upon returning from the U.S.A., withdrew Rahija from school in order that she should cook and clean for him at home, and be a shepherd and a bookkeeper. She kept accounts of the daily sales of meat to town customers and did the collection of monies owed.

Asseef and his father were both very artistic, drawing designs for ladies’ slips and dresses which the women embroidered. This is the source of the visual artistry that is in the family—Jasper, Grayce Kerbawy Neimy, Edward McCarus, Paul Scott, Douglas Kinnaird Bassett, and others.

Rahija had other talents from an early age way by his house, she failed to hear him coughing. Entering the room, she found him dead. He had died alone. [Matthew Bassiet.]

28 A reconstructed chronology indicates the following sequence of events. Rahija was born in May, 1891, and at age four, in 1895, Asseef left for America. Rahija entered school in 1897 at age 6. When Rahija was 8, in 1899, Numnum died, and Asseef returned from America (possibly upon on news of Numnum’s illness). Rahija, eight years old and in her third year of school, was withdrawn to become house keeper to Asseef and mother to Della, age four. Sam was 15 and Jaspar, 13.
including culinary arts. She excelled in baking bread. There were no manufactured stoves in the house, rather the baking was done in a deeply dug hole in the ground. Mama would sit on the ground working the dough and baking various assortments of bread and pastries. With hands flying she flipped the dough from hand to hand, enlarging the dough until it was a wide, thin, round mass which she would place on a pillow and place in the oven. This bread was called *khubz marquuq* and was one of many kinds of bread and pastries she learned to cook.

For breakfast, bread, olives, and *lábani* were usual, and of course there were fresh figs in season to be plucked from nearby trees. For water, Mama went to the *ayn*, or well, which supplied water for the town. One day, on her way from the *ayn*, she saw a man sleeping with a snake curled on his chest.

Mama had never seen a camel until a stranger came to visit with her father. Rahija was outside looking at the camel when she was visited with an urge to tease the camel. *Wizz, 'aynnik, fil-qaadúus, fi-l-minnshaár*, she teased, when suddenly the camel’s eyes turned the reddest of red and the camel came after Mama. Camels are known for their temper and have been known to kill their owners. This camel started chasing Mama, and Mama began to run down the hill, which was made into terraces with wide steps. The camel came closer and closer and was almost upon her when
she suddenly laid down at the edge of a terrace allowing the camel’s wide stride to step over the prone figure of this frightened twelve-year old girl.

In addition to her day’s work, Mama also was up late many nights working. Her father often invited men to play cards, and Mama was required to serve food and drinks, including home made spirits—araq and wine. Wine was made by crushing the grapes barefooted, a practice carried over to America.

One night Mama was very sleepy when her father asked for his slippers. Mama found the slippers but being so sleepy she did not take them to her father, but put them in the fireplace where they burned. Her father became very angry, but one of the guests interrupted and said, “Leave her alone, can you not see that she is too sleepy.”

After Maheba left for America and Sam and Jasper followed, Rahija started begging her father for permission to join them. Every night she dreamed of flying through the village on a magic carpet to escape the men that wanted to marry her. Finally, Asseef consented, and in the last weeks before leaving, there were parties. Mama and Aunt Della would dance the raqs which they had done at many weddings. Before Rahija left, Asseef asked her to duqqii-l-qahwi, using the wooden mortar and pestle used to grind coffee beans to make music. He loved the rhythm that she made. He was sad to see his second daughter leave for America.

Mama came to America with the Hawarny family.
They probably traveled by boat from Beirut to Marseilles, France, and by train to Paris. It was here that Mama saw her first monkey and first zoo. They then traveled by train to Le Harve, France, where on July 8, 1911, they departed on the S.S. La Lorraine, a French steam ship, traveling steerage. She supplied her own food: bread, olives, fruit. After one week at sea, they arrived at Ellis Island, Port of New York, on July 15, 1911. According to the official immigration passenger lists, Mama was five feet, four inches tall, with black hair and brown eyes, and was 20 years of age. She was of good health, possessing $22 dollars for her train ticket, and bound for Pikeville, Kentucky, where her brother and sponsor, Sam, resided. She swore to the U. S. immigration authorities that she was neither a polygamist or anarchist. The Hawarney family went to Milan, Michigan, and Rahija was put on a train bound for Pikeville with a tag penned to her blouse: "MY BROTHER, SAM SAAD, PIKEVILLE, KENTUCKY."

Before boarding the train, she bought some fruit, but soon after the fruit was stolen and she went without food for the trip. After two days, the conductor told her she had arrived, and Mama stepped off the train, but Sam was not to be found. The conductor had misread the sign, and she was in Paintsville, about 30 miles from Pikeville. Mama waited all day and all night. The next day, a young lady saw Mama and came to help. She read the note then called to Pikeville. Sam arrived on the
next train to take Rahija home, but before Sam came, Mama borrowed a comb from the young lady to comb her hair.

After arriving in Pikeville, Sam sent Rahija to live with Maheba and her husband, George Kerbawy, in Blissfield, Michigan. When she arrived, she was told to "go to the kitchen and stand beside your sister but say nothing." Mama did as she was told. Aunt Maheba asked to know who was this stranger and why was she here. After a pause, there was a moment of recognition. Mama lived with the Kerbawy family for a few months, working in the Blissfield Fur Company as a seamstress.

While in Blissfield, Maheba acted as a matchmaker, and arranged for Mama to meet Papa, who lived with his parents, Yussef and Adlah, and his brothers, Sam and Frank (Slaymen and Ferris), on a farm only four miles from Blissfield.

Abraham was a peddler who had almost married earlier. He was engaged and was on the way to the courthouse when Frank interceded to prevent the marriage.

Rahija and Abraham were married in 1914. They were to have been married on February 1 with Elizabeth and Albert Jamra, but someone did not want the two couples married on the same day. Rahija and Abraham delayed their marriage until the 2nd of February, Groundhog’s Day. The Rev. Basil Kerbawy El Khoury officiated at the ceremony.
I am sitting with my mother and Dustin Hoffman at the round table in the corner of the store near a window. On the same side of the room is a tall soda counter and between the table and the counter is a curtained entrance to “the back room.” The store, with its incandescent lights and wooden floors, has a feel of the nineteen-thirties. At the table also sits a couple from the Old Country who now live in America. He is a quiet man in his late thirties with an even quieter wife.

My mother sits with her back to the counter, Dustin is in the corner to the right of my mother and I sit at her left. Dustin and I are talking. When I tell him that I have come out of the ethnic closet to take pride in my heritage he reveals that he is one-half Lebanese. He tells me that his childhood home is Lowell, Massachusetts, and when I ask if he knows “Uncle” Mike Bassett, he says he does and that he is a cousin to Mike. I ask if he knows Geri Deschanes, he replies “Yes, she, too, is my cousin.”

Excited beyond words, I yell and jump up and down. Everyone hears me and comes to see what is happening. I shout, “Dustin Hoffman is my cousin; Dustin Hoffman is my cousin.” Someone begins taking group pictures to mark the occasion.
We are eating. Mama has a spinach fatiiri on her plate and she tears a corner from the fatiiri and gives it to me and it melts in my mouth.

Where is Dustin? I don’t know where Dustin is. I want to see Dustin to tell him that I think he is one of America’s greatest actors.

I recall the interview he gave to Richard Merriman in LIFE Magazine before the release of Little Big Man. In that interview, Dustin quotes from Walt Whitman: "...out of the nine month midnight...," and I want to tell him that I remember that. I want to say that everything he has done has been wonderful: The Graduate, Little Big Man, Tootsie, Death of a Salesman, Rainman.

I can’t find Dustin: has he gone?

I wake up from my dream to go to the bathroom and my dream is gone, but I am left with good feelings. It felt good to be with Mama again.

Abe J. Bassett, April 19, 1989