

Sample Chapters

Lauraina Bashir

From Bliss to This

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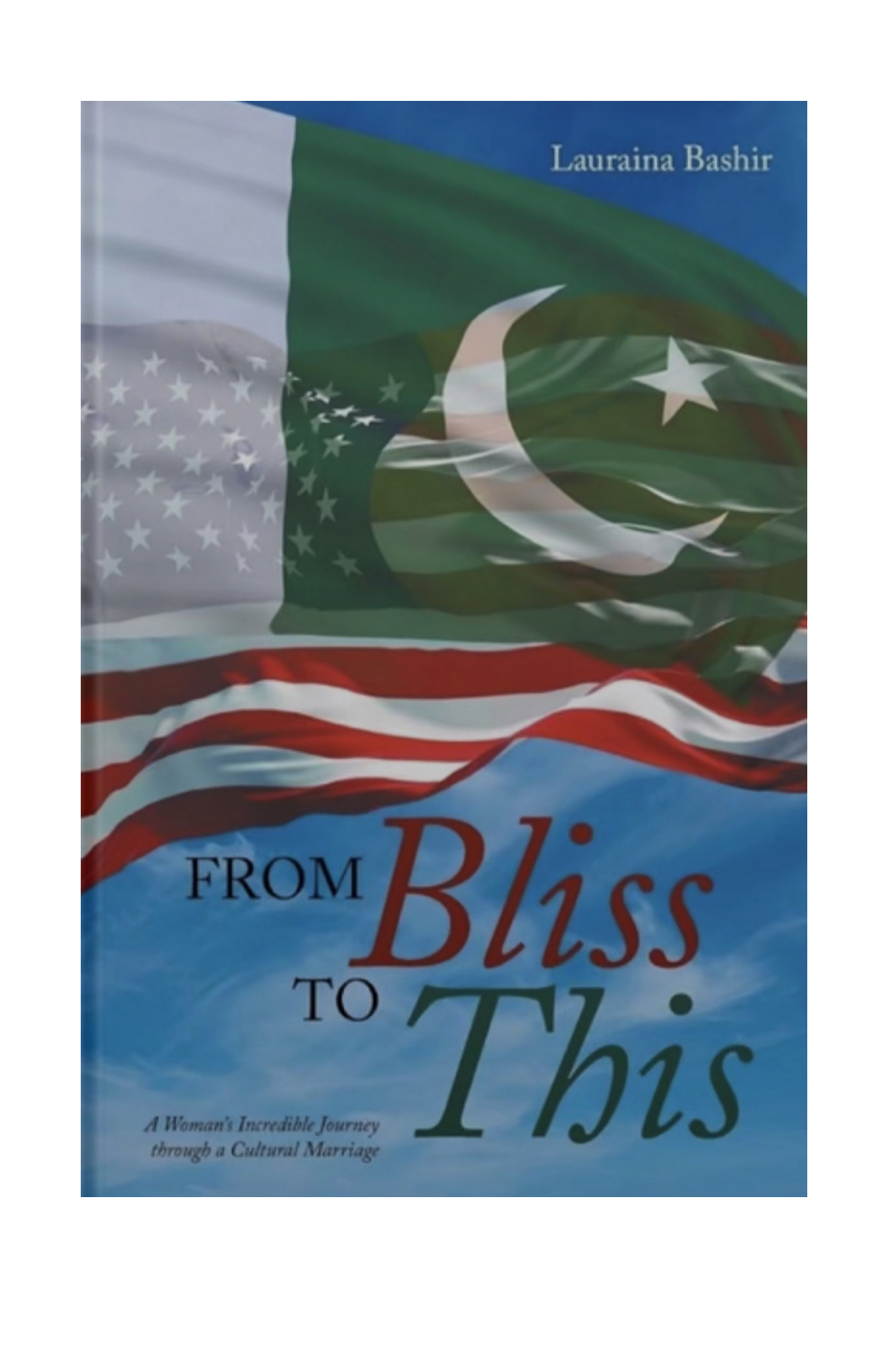
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A Three Chapter Sample

The background of the book cover is a composite image of the United States flag and the Malaysian flag. The American flag's stars and stripes are visible on the left and bottom, while the green and white stripes of the Malaysian flag, along with its crescent and star, are on the right. The flags appear to be waving against a clear blue sky.

Lauraina Bashir

FROM *Bliss*
TO *This*

*A Woman's Incredible Journey
through a Cultural Marriage*

From Bliss...

To This !

Introduction

Introduction

What could possibly go wrong in a marriage to a Muslim man, mixing country, culture, and vast age and religious differences? How does love and trust cause such blindness? This book is essential for any woman who believes that a man with the right words is the right man, regardless of his nationality. Foreign men are vastly different from most American men; they can be incredibly charming and sincere. They know how to get what they need and will do whatever it takes to achieve it. You will learn how one woman's strength and endurance survived when her husband hijacked her happy marriage to him, and imperiled her life and well-being. Love is as strong as pain; it took untold amounts of both before freedom and the courage to talk about it finally came. It's crucial to know that in desperation, many foreign men come to the USA with a game plan and will use love and lies to get what they need to help their families back home.

In third world countries, love and women can become dispensable when money is everything. "Dishonesty, even in the name of God, is a way of life and survival for some. I have twenty-four years of expertise living in a cultural marriage to a Muslim man. You will learn all about the charm and the truth in this book. I have since met and spoken to many women who believed in their Muslim husbands and ended up in a similar story, mostly including bigamy, polygyny, or polyamory, and excruciating failure. These relationships become very complicated. My first critic, who always listened to me and knows that my story is true, called this book nonfiction that reads like a good novel. You can't make this up! I hope to help prevent women who might be thinking of marriage to a charming foreigner, especially those who talk of marriage much too soon, from making the same mistakes. The Bliss I felt at the beginning of my marriage turned into this nightmare the moment I returned from our last trip to Pakistan together.

From Bliss to This

FALLING

Love is supposed to be unconditional and without expectation. To give means someone has to take. If you give without receiving, you'll find yourself empty. Culturally, I had no idea what to expect from the Muslim lifestyle or their beliefs. I met Mohammed when he was twenty-three; I was a caregiver by nature and a home health aide by trade. I worked for a home care agency for nine years before I met Mo. Although I worked full-time days in my office as a scheduler/coordinator, I had one in-home patient for eight years before we met, whom I was very fond of, so I wanted to continue caring for him until he passed. My morning visit began two hours before I drove to my office; after I finished my day, I'd go back to my favorite patient to help him with dinner and get him safely into bed for the night.

Each morning, I stopped at the convenience store near my patient's house to buy a newspaper for him and a cup of coffee for myself. I met Mo at the store for the first time. The regular night clerk informed me that he would be switching to the day shift. The following morning, he introduced me to Mo, the new replacement that he was training. The next day, Mo greeted me with a smile. Since I was the only person in the store, he stood beside me and chatted quite comfortably, as I made my coffee. He was much younger than I and had a delightful way about him. His personality and enthusiasm seemed innocent, yet he acted confident when speaking with me. He said he had recently arrived from Pakistan, but he was British, born in the UK.

Over the next two weeks, Mo made a concerted effort to converse with me each morning while I was in the store. I was surprised when he asked me to take him for a ride so he could see the sights in the area; all he had seen so far were the houses he had passed while walking to and from work, he told me. I brushed him off, saying I didn't have time because I was too busy with my job, but he was undeterred. He asked me the same question every day and got the same reply. Mo told me he was trying to get his driver's license and a car. He wanted to go out with me because I seemed more mature and different from the other girls he'd met at the store: "They smoke and drink, and I have never done those

things,” Mo said. He also thought they looked like party girls, but I looked like someone who enjoyed a home life. I asked his age, and when Mo replied that he was twenty-four, I couldn’t help but laugh. I told him my age and said, “I’m way too old for you.” He admitted that he thought I was much younger, but knowing my age didn’t stop him from complimenting me and inviting me to go places with him.

Each time he saw me in the following weeks, he’d still try to convince me to take him out for a ride in my car; I’d put him off. Later, he began to give me small bunches of fresh flowers that the store sold. I saw him pay cash for them out of his pocket each time. Once, he was trying very hard to progress with me, smiling, joking, and flirting. Finally, after I kept shutting him down, he blurted boldly, “You don’t know it yet, but you’re going to marry me someday.” I laughed. “That’s what you think,” I said as I walked out the door. “You’re too young for me.” The door closed behind me. Mo continued to inquire about my life. I told him I had a boyfriend who lived with me, yet he still asked me out and flirted with me daily. His efforts to pursue my affection with playful flirting continued throughout the summer. Mo’s morning ritual was to present flowers for my hand and a lunch request, along with my change. I tried several times to convince him not to waste his money on flowers for me, but he refused to take them back. The girls at my office often asked me about my secret admirer because I brought fresh flowers to my desk daily.

I dated Jim briefly after I divorced my first husband, but at that time, Jim was not ready for a relationship. I was single for nine years; then I reconnected with Jim again, and we had been dating steadily for the past three. We talked about marriage, and Jim had recently moved in. I knew how fun it was to date Jim, but I would not marry him without knowing what it would be like to live with him. After living with Jim for three months, I realized that things would not work out for us. It was difficult asking him to leave; we had only lived together for a short time, but it was long enough for me to know that Jim drank much more than I was aware. I was smart enough to know I couldn’t change him. Jim didn’t take the news well, but I felt relieved.

The following Monday, when Mo was coaxing me into a ride and lunch. I suddenly gave it up and said, “Okay, lunch, and I’ll take you for a short ride.” But in hindsight, he was taking me for the ride of my life instead. At 11:30 a.m. the following Saturday, I picked Mo up at the store. He came out with an oversized floral bouquet and presented it to me.

He was clearly nervous when he opened the car door and told me, “I’ve never been out with a girl before. You made me work really hard for this.” It was sweet to see that he was a bit scared, so I responded with a

smile, "And you were so darn persistent." We had lunch at a restaurant on the harbor. Sitting and talking with my admirer at a waterside table was delightful. We continued our conversation after lunch when I took him for a ride to the beach. He spoke nervously to me about who he was and about his life. Later that afternoon, I dropped Mo off at the store. He needed to sleep before his shift. After that, I began picking him up for weekend rides if I didn't have other plans. We spent time getting to know each other. I always picked him up and dropped him off at the store before I went home. Mo got his license and a car in the early fall, so he asked me to go out with him more often. We shopped in the city, had pleasant lunches, and talked all day before he dropped me off at the store to pick up my car. We grew quite fond of each other and became friends. We had never been out in the evening, so when Mo invited me for dinner, it was our first actual date. We progressed to dinner at his house. I thoroughly enjoyed having him cook the meals that were traditional in Pakistan.

There was no sexual innuendo between us; he never approached me that way. We were friends who enjoyed being together until one morning, as I was preparing my coffee, he suddenly reached out and pulled me close to him; his arms wrapped around me, holding me against his chest for a long time. I felt his heart pounding as he looked at me, then kissed me passionately. Nervously, he said, "I don't understand what's happening to me. My heart is beating very fast, I'm sweating, and my face and hands are hot. I don't know why, but my stomach jumps whenever I'm close to you." I smiled at him; his innocence was so cute. I didn't know how to respond, so I backed away from him; I knew it was his first experience with attraction and butterflies. I smiled, then teased him, saying, "It feels like you swallowed butterflies, but I promise you'll get over it." I was flattered, but I didn't want to encourage him at the time because I knew he was innocent. I recalled from one conversation in his culture that males and females were never alone together until after marriage.

On my birthday, Mo took the time to drive forty-five minutes from the store to my office. He walked in with a beautiful birthday cake with my name written on it, some flowers, and a lovely wrapped gift. I was pleasantly surprised, but unsure if I was okay with him coming to my office. I was always busy at work; my job required full attention with a large number of patients and numerous aides to schedule and manage.

I opened his gift and thanked him for the beautiful cake and the stunning necklace he gave me, then I said, "I'm not sure you should stay because I have a hectic day here." He said, "Okay, I'll go," then hugged me and wished me a "Happy Birthday" before he left. My boss told me I shouldn't have made him leave so soon, making me think I might have

hurt his feelings. I felt a little guilty; I knew he had good intentions. I felt more uneasy later because Jim, the guy I broke up with, was waiting in my driveway as I arrived home from work, to ask if we could talk over a birthday dinner. I went with him to a restaurant a half mile from my house. After we talked for a while, Jim asked if we could get back together and mentioned his nephew's wedding in New York. Knowing he had made reservations in New York for us before we broke up, and that he would not have gone without me, I agreed to accompany him to the wedding; next, to be clear, I told him I didn't want to get back together.

I wore the necklace the next day and sincerely apologized to Mo for making him leave so soon. We went out for lunch that Saturday, and Mo told me he loved me as we sat together on a bench at the pond near his house. He asked me to marry him. I told him I was divorced twice and couldn't have children. I was hesitant about getting married again. I also told him that I had previous plans to go to a wedding with Jim, who still wanted me to go with him. Mo said he would wait until I returned and asked me again to consider marrying him while I was away. I thought about it, I didn't want to confuse Mo by spending too much time with him if I wasn't ready to get married. As we drove back from New York, Jim pleaded with me to reconsider getting back together. He said he loved me and wanted to marry me. I couldn't tell him that his drinking had scared me off. I did tell him we couldn't get back together. I had two marriage proposals and was scared of both of them.

A few days after I returned from New York, Mo told me many reasons why he felt he could make me happy as a husband and repeated that he wanted to marry me. I gave him many other reasons why I didn't want to be married, mostly because I thought he was too young. I was afraid that it would make a difference later as I aged. I reminded him I could no longer have children, and he might want them someday. He told me that children didn't matter, and my age didn't either.

My first husband and I bought my house through my father's real estate friend. Mo was only five years old while I was purchasing a home. I had two children, so I tried to preserve my marriage. After nineteen years, I decided it was no longer worth saving, so when we divorced, I bought out my ex-husband's interest in our two-family house. I promised my dad I'd take his advice by keeping the house solely in my name. The rental portion paid the mortgage and made it affordable for me as a single woman. A year after my divorce, I met and fell deeply in love with Rick at a dance club. We got married after dating for a year. Rick had two beautiful daughters from a previous marriage. I adored them. My relationship with the girls has continued for thirty years.

Unfortunately, Rick passed away just over a month ago as I'm writing this. I remember many happy times when I was more comfortable with Rick than anyone else.

While we were together, we chartered fifty-foot sailboats and sailed the Caribbean seas on several cruises. We had a small twenty-two-foot sailboat at home that we sailed on the East Coast in the summers near my house. We also spent many weekends at a mansion in Newport, Rhode Island, that Rick's friend leased. Sadly, Rick cheated on me two and a half years after our marriage. I was devastated and heartbroken; I became depressed when I came home from work and discovered that Rick had moved out. It was almost two years before I divorced him, and I felt ready to start dating again. I saw Jim one afternoon, and from there, we rekindled our relationship.

Mo told me a lot about his life in the beginning. His mother was very superstitious; she believed her son was evil after she fell during her pregnancy. She rejected Mo when he was two months old, so his father sent their firstborn son away from England to be raised by his sister and his three brothers in Islamabad, Pakistan. Mo's oldest uncle owned a successful business and built a large family home for his parents and siblings. He owned a successful business. Mo's parents had other children after he was sent to live with his uncles in Pakistan, but he was the firstborn son, and the only one that his mother didn't want. When his parents and his siblings came to visit Pakistan, his mother would not let him come into the house. He was just a young boy who wanted his mother and father, so he would sit outside the screen door and watch his family from a distance because they wouldn't include him. His dad did nothing to change things; he chose his wife's wishes over his son's needs. Mo began to hate his mother, especially after his father died when he was nine. Sadly, Mo barely knew him. He continued to struggle with his feelings of anger from their rejection. Mo was raised in the main house by his oldest uncle, who died years later when Mo was eighteen.

His youngest uncle took over the operations of his deceased brother's successful cement business, but under his poor management, the company failed financially. All the wealth the family had was gone. There were no longer any means of support for Mo, his widowed aunt, or her four children. As the oldest and the only one legally able to leave Pakistan because of his British passport, Mo left his family to seek work that would support them. After moving to the UK, Mo got a job as a laborer loading container ships at the Port of Southampton. He sent his pay to his family in Pakistan regularly. A year and a half later, he was thin and exhausted from overwork and lack of sleep. He was hospitalized after he got sick. When Mo recovered, he left Southampton and returned

home to Islamabad. Mo worked various jobs, but the pay was meager, and the family suffered.

One evening, Mo was out with his buddies and was introduced to Susan, an American girl. Susan had met a friend of Mo's who had stayed for a time in America the year before. He invited her to visit him in Pakistan. Mo told Susan he was going to America as soon as his uncle heard from a man in New York who might take him under his wing. Mo took the business card Susan had offered him to New York City several weeks later. He found a job right away; however, Mo didn't care for his uncle's friend, so he decided to call Susan. She told him which bus to take if he wanted to leave, and she greeted him at the bus station when he arrived. She told Mo that she had found a job for him in a convenience store, which included a place to live, in a small Rhode Island town on the coast. Naturally, Mo was thrilled; moreover, he was grateful to Susan for her kindness, resulting in Mo and I meeting each other on the first day of his new job.

Mo told me that if I married him, we would be married for life because Pakistanis do not believe in divorce. He promised he would always keep me with him and care for me. "Age makes no difference to me," he said. "I'm marrying your person, not your years. You'll never be in a nursing home as you age," Mo told me things that any woman would need to hear. He said children were not his priority, but owning his own business was. I said, "You might change your mind later, then I'd have to accommodate you because when a person wants children, they don't stop thinking about having them." He repeated that he was sure about it. I was falling for him, so I tried to weigh my affection against reality and the obstacles of age, cultural differences, and my family, including my adult children. I felt love for him, but was torn between my doubts and feelings. Each day, I asked myself if I was being foolish and if I could trust Mo. I spent many days thinking deeply, questioning how I felt, and wondering if I was being silly with a charming yet innocent person.

In November, Mo and I went out to dinner, which later became a conversation at my house, then intimacy. It was the first night we slept together. He was very nervous and anxious that he might do something wrong, and asked me to teach him what to do. He asked the questions, and I showed him the answers. Mo had never been with a woman before and was eager for me to help him learn how to make me happy. Being with him romantically for the first time was very sweet and exciting for us. He was patient and perfect; I was "hooked," and he was in awe. Afterward, while lying together, he hugged me; his first words were, "Now, you have to marry me because " we did sex together." On Christmas Eve, Mo bought me a live tree and several gifts. He asked me

about the traditions of Christian belief, and knew there was a lot of similarity between our religions. He said that Muslims believe in Jesus as the Prophet of God but do not celebrate Christmas. Mo told me Muslim men were allowed to marry Christian women. Then he explained that Muslim women could not marry Christian males because, in Islam, the head of a household needs to be Muslim. He said he wouldn't pressure me to become Muslim if I married him, but I didn't say that I would marry him; I didn't say I wouldn't either.

I'm not sure when I agreed to marry Mo, but I knew I loved him. It seemed like he had hypnotized me or put me under a spell; perhaps he had brainwashed me, but he indeed had me. In March of 1998, we planned a vacation to Miami, Florida, which became a marriage two years after I met him. My parents wintered in Florida, so we visited them. I didn't want to announce the wedding yet; I wasn't ready for obstacles, so I told them we were living together. I didn't want any judgment of our marriage, age, culture, or religion until I was ready. When we returned from Florida, Mo introduced me to a few friends he knew from working in his boss's other stores; we often stopped in the evenings to visit them while they worked. I enjoyed being around them and getting to know them. Mo and I visited my parents after they returned to Rhode Island for the summer.

It began to bother us that our marriage was still a secret from my parents. I agreed that I would tell them immediately. They gave us congratulations and welcomed Mo. We visited with Mom and Dad often that summer. My parents seemed to like Mo very much. My dad said he thought Mo was "a good man." Dad had a slight heart attack, then a triple bypass that summer. When October came, Dad was feeling better and planned on flying, at their children's insistence, rather than driving to Florida that winter. Our family has a grand celebration each year before our parents leave for Florida. We combine gift swapping, Christmas trees, and Thanksgiving turkeys with holiday pies; we celebrate winter birthdays with homemade cake.

My brother emailed me in August, accusing me of causing my dad's heart attack by revealing my "crazy" marriage. His words seemed cruel and hateful toward me. I discussed this with Mom and my siblings. Did they all feel that way? My nieces and nephews thought our traditional gathering would not be the same if I weren't there, so eventually, the party that my brother had planned to host that year was canceled. That winter, my brother moved to Mexico. We hardly spoke for twenty-three years. I saw him when my dad died in 2004, but that did not go well. My other siblings and their families were pleased that I was happy with Mo, and everyone seemed to like him. My children struggled with my marriage. Mo and I went to my oldest daughter's house several times.

She was at least trying to be polite and was accommodating. Her kindness to him was appreciated. That was all I needed from her. My youngest daughter couldn't hide her feelings and was rude to Mo. He didn't like her or my brother at all. I knew it would not be easy, but we all have to do what is best for ourselves. I trusted Mo; he was the first man I'd trusted since Rick left. He was good to me, and our marriage was successful so far. Our age and other differences had never become an issue. We were happy; that's all that mattered to me.

In March 1999, after Mo got his green card, we planned our first trip to Pakistan. Mo was pleased that his family would finally meet me; I was excited to travel the world, meet his family, and see where the man I loved grew up. At my insistence, Mo tried to reconnect with his birth family; He was pleased with his decision to contact his mother and sister. At first, everything went well; however, after several weeks, Mo suddenly told me he would no longer call them or accept calls from them. I asked him why, and Mo explained that his mother became belligerent on the phone and said something that triggered his memory of the degrading things she used to call him as a child. He thought everything had improved at first, but during that one call, he realized that she had not changed and never would. Unfortunately, I became the one who took the fall for that with his older sister. I suspect she thought that I told Mo not to call them again. I learned later that she didn't want to know me. Perhaps she assumed that I was the one who had kept him away from her family, not knowing that I was the one who encouraged him to give reconciliation a chance.

I spent the following weeks preparing for our trip. I told my family I was going. They were, naturally, full of questions and advice about my safety. My daughters were worried about my going to a more dangerous part of the world. I gave them the phone number and made them aware that I may not be able to contact them by email. Next, I shopped for his family; I wanted to bring things they might not know about or have easy access to. I love to fly and travel, but at that time, I had only been to the Caribbean, Mexico, and Canada. This was my first overseas trip, and I looked forward to that with excitement, not fear.

From Bliss to This

Culture Shock

Finally, the day of our trip arrived. Mo and I woke up in the middle of the night and drove to Providence for an early morning flight. I'm usually an excellent flyer, but the flight turned out to be quite challenging. It was the first time I had ever flown overseas. I was exuberant and looked forward to the flight, learning everything I could about Mo's culture and meeting his family. We would fly to London, Dubai, Karachi, and then take a bus to Hyderabad, just over an hour away, to stay with his aunt for a few days before spending close to two weeks in Islamabad. We had a three-hour layover at Heathrow, then boarded Emirates Airlines for another seven-hour flight to Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in northern Saudi Arabia. I was amazed at Emirates Airlines with what seemed like first-class service, even in the main cabin. I was pleasantly surprised when our halal (acceptable in Islam) meals arrived on china plates with real glassware and silverware rather than plastic. The food was excellent as well.

It was a comfortable ride so far. The pilot periodically informed everyone regarding our location as we flew across the earth with clear skies. He often directed our eyes below, naming the seas as we crossed them and various cities and countries. There was a GPS map on the TV screen on the seat back. I saw an airplane icon moving over the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Lebanon, and Damascus. From my window, I looked down at the sandy desert of Saudi Arabia. It was cloudless; the desert was vast and highly visible. I was amazed by the golden colors of the sand in softly rippled hills. As the sun prepared to set, I saw various shades of purple in the shadows. Beyond us were Kuwait, the Arabian Sea, and Dubai.

I tried many times to fall asleep, but seeing all this for the first time kept my mind from resting. My watch told me it was 10:30, yet it was late afternoon. We were in the sky, and time changes were happening fast, but that's not all. Suddenly, without warning, there was chaos inside the main cabin. The plane rapidly lost altitude, and screams filled the cabin's interior as we fell out of the sky for over ten seconds. Relief came for as long as it took to catch our breath, but a few seconds later, the screaming became more intense as the plane went into another free fall. The overhead luggage compartments snapped open, and pieces of

luggage fell out onto the aisles, injuring people along the way. People who were already in the aisles lost their balance. Passengers were crying, myself included. I was so frightened; I thought we would crash and die on the desert floor below. Mo held onto me; I closed my eyes tightly, waiting for whatever came next. Fortunately, we felt the plane leveling again a few moments later. What came next was the pilot's voice explaining with a sincere apology for what had occurred. "We had no time to prepare you," the pilot told us. "Air-Traffic Control detected two US military jets rapidly approaching our flight path. I was given an urgent order to drop twenty thousand feet immediately, quickly followed by another order to drop ten thousand feet more. It was a very tricky maneuver," the pilot told us, and I hope no one is seriously hurt. "If you are hurt, put on your light for the flight attendant." He reassured us further by saying the flight would go smoothly until we were safely on the ground in Dubai. The pilot became our hero immediately, as we all came to life with applause and cheers in his honor. It took the remainder of the flight to recover from our trauma after such a horrendous ordeal.

There was no time to think of our near tragedy after we landed in Dubai. My eyes were too busy when they took in the elegance of the magnificent terminal. The central portion had a massive, round hourglass-shaped structure that nearly filled the room and went from the floor to the ceiling. It was made of brilliant green and white glass Mosaic tiles and was lit from the inside, casting a beautiful glow everywhere. The effect was stunning. I saw people from many different cultures walking in all directions: Chinese, Saudis, Japanese, Asians, Monks, Europeans, Americans, and many others. As I people watched, I was interested in seeing how differently everyone dressed. Indie women with beautiful hair and bare midriffs wore colorful saris in shades of red, yellow, blue, and turquoise, and Muslim women wore a gray or black burqa, with no skin showing; in contrast, the girls following directly behind them wore shorts and tank tops, with most of their skin showing. Men and women wore suits and colorful shalwar kameezes. Saudi men wore large red-and-white checked gutrahs. Sikh men covered their uncut hair with turbans; other travelers wore jeans, T-shirts, or blouses. They appeared and disappeared for the next several hours as if they were in an extravagant and entertaining fashion parade for my private viewing.

I was captivated as I observed the whole world coming together in the Dubai terminal. I needed to use the restroom, so it was there that I was astonished by my introduction to the stainless steel "squat toilet." When I walked into the stall, I saw the cold steel and rectangular-shaped bowl fitted flat into the floor. At first, I thought, Did I make a mistake? The next stall looked the same; there was a hose with a small sprayer attached to the back wall. I laughed as I pictured myself squatting over it

in my American clothing. The only way to manage this was to remove my clothing from the waist down. What if I had bad knees? I thought to myself. Then, no wonder they wear dresses and loose clothes here. There was nothing to dry with, but I had some tissues in my bag. It was quite an eye-opening experience for me. When I came out, Mo was waiting for me. My face must have looked odd because he laughed when he heard me expressing myself as I approached him. It was March 15th when we landed in Karachi, where we would spend the night in a hotel. We had a delay in customs. The agent searched our luggage and wanted to keep Mo there while he questioned him about his marriage to an American. Mo had no patience for him, so he paid a few rupees to let us go without further delay.

I was about to receive an introduction to Pakistani driving after we got in the cab on our way to the hotel, and the unbelievably chaotic traffic. I learned what it felt like to “white-knuckle it” for several miles to the hotel. People drive on the left since India was owned by Britain years ago. I didn’t notice anyone come close to following traffic rules, including a speed limit. I saw a working traffic light, but its purpose was beyond its capability, and it became more of a decoration. I concluded that the only rule was “me first!” The road was wide, paved, and had a center line. I also noticed that lanes were, in reality, self-made. I counted eight or ten (so-called) lanes of vehicles in uneven rows crossing the width of the road in front of us. Cars wove in and out of each other to pass. I laughed when I saw one sign in big capital letters that read, “GO SLOW.” The only slow vehicles were the donkey or ox carts, as faster vehicles passed by with horns honking.

The animals seemed oblivious. There were three camels on the right, horses and donkeys pulling carts on both sides, and in the middle. Three large ox-drawn carts were trailing behind each other, holding back people who honked their horns continuously until they could pass. At my left was a mix of motorized rickshaws and trucks so dangerously overloaded with high piles of the unknown in crates. I saw trucks carrying loose crushed plastic, metal scraps, and who knows what, piled sky high. The trucks and cars crossed uneven lanes at different times, and I thought, If an overloaded truck like that toppled, it would be a real disaster. Horses with protruding ribcages appeared overworked and underfed as they pulled their enormous loads. It amazed me to see so many different animals in the streets. Surprisingly, I saw various makes and models of foreign cars, including older American cars. The many intersections were chaotic. I knew I could never drive there; it was confusing and challenging even for Pakistanis. I saw a traffic light change colors, but the intersection was full, so the lights were useless. I asked Mo about car insurance; he said, “Not here. If your car gets

damaged, it stays damaged for as long as you can still drive it.” We had to stop when traffic became jammed into the intersection as it entered from five different roads. Vehicles became stuck in the center as they met each other head-to-head. Soon, several men got out and stood with their car doors open. They were pointing at each other, speaking rapidly and loudly, likely deciding who had the most accessible access to get through the intersection first. As a passenger, I felt safe; it would not be possible if I were a pedestrian.

We got up early for a cab to the bus station. The bus ride gave me a great view of the land, which was more barren of trees than I expected, and there was not a lot to see. Mo’s “Umi” (cousin) and Chachi (auntie), Umi’s mother, met us at the bus station and greeted me with a bouquet of red roses. Umi is single; her deceased father, I learned, was some kind of “sea pirate. Mo said that the cellar used to contain stacks of gold bars, and he recalled helping his uncle stack them when he was younger. Umi drove the car, which most Pakistani women do not do. Mo said she was the same as any man in Pakistan since her father died, leaving her responsible for the care of the home and her mother. We arrived safely at their home; a twelve-foot wall enclosed it for privacy and safety. As we approached, an electric gate opened. We parked under the foyer. The outside of the house, made with cream-colored blocks of marble, was beautiful. Inside, light-green marble tiles adorned the floors and walls in the greeting room, where we sat with Chachi while Umi made us a welcome tea. After tea, we had a chance to freshen up with a shower, then Umi took us on a tour of their property. The backyard housed a crane and a white peacock with its beautiful feathers gloriously spread. A coconut palm was bearing its fruit high at the top. In addition, Umi grew potted herbs and vegetables near the outside wall. Umi seemed hesitant to speak English to me because she feared she would say it incorrectly and didn’t want to embarrass herself.

Although English is taught in their schools and is the language of the government, the opportunity to speak it is rare for most. Later, Chachi and Umi were preparing dinner, so I went into the kitchen to watch. That evening, we had a delicious meal in the dining room, where I met Umi’s youngest brother Yusuf, his wife, and their baby, but soon he and his wife would return to their home in Southeast Asia. Umi’s other brothers, counter to tradition, do not live at home. As females, her sisters traditionally live with their husbands’ families nearby. The following morning, we went to another part of the city to visit Mo’s middle uncle’s wife, Mehreem, who grew up here. She now lives in Islamabad with Mo’s family but is staying in Hyderabad with her mother because her father passed away a short time before we arrived. Traditionally, she has to stay for a mourning period of forty days. Eight children and several adults

were in the apartment. Before going home, Umi said she needed some groceries for our dinner. Several people on the street saw me sitting in the car as we waited. Women, children, and curious onlookers began surrounding the vehicle. Some were banging on the car's sliding window, trying to open it further, wanting to touch me and beg. Children were pasting themselves to the front windshield to look in. When Umi returned, she tried to shoo them away like flies, but some held on with one hand and continued banging on the car when she was backing up to leave.

Next, we went to a shop for falooda, a delicious milkshake with fruit in it. It was pretty hot outside, so this was very refreshing. Our last stop was to buy bread. The shops were not fancy; they looked like cement garages with gates in front. When Umi pulled in, a group of men and boys stood talking together on the street. Mo said, "Let's go," so I got out of the car. The males stepped aside, leaving a wide berth that created a path for us. We ended at a circular stone pit built below the ground called a tandoor oven. At the bottom of the cylinder, I could see the fiery hot coals. The bread, called naan, was round and flat. The dough lay on a floured board with little finger indents in the top to keep it lying flat. As the baker slapped the smooth circular walls of the tandoor, it stuck to the hot stone while it baked. Inside the oven, I saw several round, flat pieces of naan stuck to the walls. When it began to release itself, the baker used a tongs-like tool to grab naan one by one before they fell into the fire below. Finally, the finished naan was stacked and covered with a cloth, ready to be sold. We bought several pieces that were hot and freshly made. Other passersby who saw the crowd gathered together discovered that it was I who everyone was watching the girl with the yellow hair. They smiled and tried to talk to me, saying hello in English as I walked through the human pathway to the car.

That evening I met Chachi's oldest daughter, two sons, and their families, who came to eat dinner with us. Her daughter-in-law was a nurse at the local hospital, and I soon learned that she was fluent in English, so we had a pleasant conversation. Chachi sat beside me at the table and looked directly at me while gesturing and chatting with me in Urdu, hoping that, by some miracle, I would understand. Mo commented that his aunt liked me. I loved her big smile, and she laughed a lot. I didn't always need to know her words to understand her. Umi caught on, then told her siblings that their mom was talking my ear off, and everyone laughed. I understood why they laughed, so I told them that my responses to Chachi came only from instinct, but she was sure I understood her language. Mo translated that to her, and she squeezed my hand and smiled so sweetly. After dinner, the English-speaking nurse talked to me about their clothing style. I told her that I like to sew, and she told her daughters to show me their newly made yellow dotted swiss

shalwar kameezes. They called the material chicken rather than dotted swiss, although I'm sure the spelling is different. The shalwar kameez is the traditional dress for males and females. The kameez is a knee-length cotton shirt/dress with either full or three-quarter sleeves; the shalwar is a loose pant with a tight ankle band worn underneath the kameez. Women also wear a dupatta, a wide scarf draped front to back and then over both shoulders. It is worn to fully cover their hair at prayer time and in public.

Opposite views on strictness to the religion's traditions occurred when the Prophet Muhammad died, and there became more diversification in how Muslims dress. New leadership brought conflicts between the different relationships the Prophet had. Currently, 76 percent of Pakistani Muslims are Sunni. The rest are primarily Shi'ite and a small percentage of other Muslim denominations. There is a Christian population in Pakistan as well. Mo's family is Sunni. Hyderabad is in the Sindh province in the south of Pakistan. A unique and artistic pattern is hand-stamped onto cotton. This popular material is specific to the Sindh province. The women there prefer to wear clothing made of Sindhi cloth, and most people in Pakistan recognize the famous print and know when a person might be from Sindh. More traditional Muslims wear the burqa, niqab, or hijab in public, preferring that women not show their skin.

The mosques have loudspeaker systems in the minarets. In Islam, Muslims have a lot of traditions. The muezzin recites the Adhan (listen to prayer) for all Muslims to come to the mosques to pray. The imam leads the prayer in the mosque five times a day, primarily for males, but there is a separate section set aside for females. Women and children generally pray at home. Several muezzins begin the first prayer in unison at 4:30 a.m. from loudspeakers in several neighborhood mosques located around the city. The call to prayer fills my ears just as I'm enjoying my deepest sleep. I usually cannot get back to sleep. It's not an unpleasant recital; it's interesting and has a melody to it. The word Islam means submission. Muslims are followers of Islam and believe, as Christians do, in the same God of Abraham. Traditions of Islam come first by "submission" to God's will, then second by the way Muhammad lived his life (the Sunna), recorded in writing, according to his words and deeds (the Hadith). Sharia (straight path) law works along with government law. Muslims have five obligations in their way of life: (1) confession of belief in only one God and Muhammad as his Prophet; (2) prayer, five times a day; (3) if affordable, Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), once in their lifetime; (4) charity; and (5) fasting. Muslims must strive to realize the will of Allah (Arabic for God).

Mo and I rode to the market one day with Umi in a local bus. While we were stuck in traffic, I saw a man straining his neck as he stared at me from another bus beside us. I laughed when he went to great lengths to poke the person sitting next to him and made a great effort to draw his attention to me so he wouldn't miss seeing the woman with the yellow hair. Next, I heard a car honking relentlessly. One driver wanted to pass us even though there was no room. Finally, our bus driver lost his patience with the honking and stopped the bus. He stepped out and yelled loudly at the driver behind us, then we promptly went on our way. We were unprepared for the public reaction I would receive as we stepped off the bus. I thought of Moses parting the seas. As a buzz spread the news, people uniformly stepped to both sides of the sidewalk, one after the other, then stopped to watch us as we walked the clear path and filled in behind the three of us for two blocks until we reached the marketplace. At the market, we looked at the various offerings of fish lying on the ice in front of the vendors. Some of the shoppers began to trail behind us very closely. They stopped and started when we did. I wore American clothing. Umi lent me a dupatta to wear on my head, but my blond hair and white skin still stood out.

The small, crowded market made me uncomfortable, so Mo held my arm. I noticed one young boy always standing near me as I moved. He followed us as we shopped. He was staring at me, and when I looked at him, he said hello in English. I said hello, but he repeated it, so that might have been the only word he knew. When I smiled at him, he smiled back. He followed us until Mo finally said something to him, and the boy moved on. When other people came too close for his comfort, Mo would turn me away from them. Umi chose to go to vendors alone to buy what she needed. She said it was better to stay away from me in the market after one vendor, whom she tried to purchase fish from, doubled the usual price when he saw that she was with an American. Things returned to normal when most customers got used to my presence. That evening, we enjoyed fish for dinner with blood carrots and naan.

The following day, we visited Yusuf at an apartment building that his family owns. Initially, Yusuf took us upstairs to his office to show us the radios and other electronics he used to build and repair for income. After receiving an invitation, we went to Umi's oldest sister's house and met her twins, both university students. We had a lovely day and evening there. Their son was studying to be an engineer and was trying to pass exams for the opportunity to study abroad. The daughter went to college. I walked with her to see the small campus. She loved it there and was proud to show it off to me. We spent the remainder of the day visiting Umi's two brothers in the city. Their houses are next to each other. They

showed us many exotic birds and tropical plants they raised on their rooftops. That evening, we talked to Yusef, Umi, and their mother for quite some time. Umi planned to take us to the airport in the morning for the flight to Islamabad. We said goodbye before going to bed. Chachi hugged me affectionately, then handed me one thousand rupees when she said goodbye. "To spend in Islamabad," Mo interrupted. I hugged her again and thanked her warmly. She was so kind to me with her generous gift. I had a lovely time in Hyderabad. I enjoyed meeting the family so much. When we returned to Karachi, I asked Mo if we could see the Arabian Sea shore, so we took a cab; I was amazed to see several men riding camels along the beach. I thought, You don't see that every day. Later, we boarded our flight to Islamabad.

From Bliss to This

Pakistan

When we checked in at the airport in Karachi, I was pulled aside and searched by a female attendant at the airport; Mo said that searching women was very common in recent times. They are often used by males who foolishly think they will get away with transporting illegal items by hiding them in their women's clothing. I assumed the women were considered dispensable since men support the families. Mo's friend, an airport employee, met us right after we landed, as we entered the airport in the capital city, Islamabad. He escorted us quickly and privately through the airport. Several friends and relatives carrying roses, flower leis, and gifts greeted us. It was touching when, one by one, I was thoroughly hugged and warmly welcomed. Finally, we headed home in a small entourage of cars. After I arrived, I was shown to our room, unpacked, and separated all the things I had brought for the families. I had bottles of lotions, perfume, nail polish, shampoo, conditioner, and hair decorations for the girls, in addition to school supplies and toys for the younger children, packed into the shiny colored bags I brought for each family.

Three families lived in two houses on the property; both have upstairs apartments built for sons and future in-laws. A common wall with a gated door separated the two houses, and a twelve-foot cement wall encloses both on the street. Each home had an open flat roof with chest-high walls. Mo grew up in a house with servants and more modern amenities than most Pakistanis have. The family was charitable, enjoyed a certain status, and was well-known in the community. Mo's father grew up here. However, he escaped the Pakistani border years before and fled to Dunstable, England. Several years later, he received refugee exemption and forgiveness, which gave him automatic British citizenship, so he could finally return to Islamabad to marry Mo's mother. Mo was born in Dunstable. Since his father's death, Mo's mother shared her time between England and Pakistan with her other children. He barely knew his siblings, but the oldest girls he came to know well when they were children.

When Mo first told me his story, I thought perhaps Mo's mother rejected him because of postpartum depression. Mo's Aunt Anum was not yet married, so she still lived in the family home in Islamabad.

Anum was less than twenty years older than Mo and became the most significant influence in his life. He worships her, so to him, Anum is his mother. She raised him as though he were her firstborn child. Anum's oldest brother provided all Mo needed growing up, and Mo always felt favored over his cousins by his aunt and uncle. Anum was just over eighteen when she became like a mother to Mo. He got into a lot of trouble at school by bullying other kids and beating them up; he told me he had many outbursts of anger. His uncle often had to pick Mo up at school after he had beaten a classmate or destroyed school property whenever he was in a rage. Mo developed a good relationship with his oldest sister, who often came to stay in Islamabad with their parents. All the children played together, so he understood that she was his sister from a very young age. On this trip, his mother and sisters were home in England, so I never met them.

I presented my colorful bags of gifts to the families at the house. The children were delighted, and the adults were happy with all the gifts. The two younger boys immediately became excited when they saw the toy cars and airplanes I brought and ran off to play with them. I met the women who played their role as parents to Mo at one time or another. I also spoke to his deceased uncle's three daughters and met their widowed mother. The two older girls, Adiva and Ayesha, were in college, and the youngest, Ziva, was twelve years old. Mo always refers to them as his sisters. Their brother, Yamar, was twenty. Living in America helped Mo become the financial support for everyone living in the family complex. Mo's father originally owned the attached house, which was now occupied by his middle uncle. After his father's passing, Mo became a rightful half-interest property owner in the attached house. The other half-interest was split between his mother and sisters because they were females. Islamic law says males inherit the majority portion of the property. His mother rarely came to the house in Islamabad, preferring to stay with her own family after Mo's father died.

Uncle Rasheed was the oldest living uncle and lived with his wife, three daughters, and two sons in his father's house. The youngest uncle, Mustafa, lived upstairs in the main house. He had three children, two boys and a girl. Anum lives with her husband Hajji, and their two children at Hajji's family home in another part of the city. They will also stay with all of us while we are visiting. Twenty-two of us are together in the family home for the next three weeks. Hajji is a title a Muslim earns as one who has made the pilgrimage to "hajj" in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Hajji was always smiling when he came from work each day. He had a fruit business, so he always brought home fresh fruit. Hajji could only say a handful of English words, but I found it easy to understand his intent, and

I admired him. He was so good to me; he always smiled and asked whenever he came through the door. "You happy?" Pakistan is the only country in the world established as a religious country. Britain owned many countries in Europe and Asia, so when India became independent from Britain, Muslims, rather than Hindus, mainly occupied the land in the lower western part of India. This portion of land and its people separated from India after a civil war. It reestablished itself as an independent religious country called the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, is on the site of one of the earliest known human settlements. Items found there date back to the Stone Age. Relics and skulls found were dated to Neolithic man five thousand years ago.

After I got to know everyone, I tried to adjust to the accommodations. It pleased me that someone had gone out to get me some toilet paper. Upstairs in our room, I noticed a handgun hanging over the mirror and a military rifle with a band of ammunition in the corner against the wall. In the bathroom was a porcelain squat toilet. There wasn't a separate shower stall; the floor dipped toward a drain located in the corner of the room. A bucket was on the floor near the drain, and a handheld sprayer was attached to the wall. Another hose with a sprayer was in the corner near the squat toilet. The water goes out to the floor and down into the drain.

I was in the room upstairs later in the afternoon when I heard a tap on the door. Ziva wanted to come in to visit. She was very excited, always smiling and laughing. Shortly after she came in, she sat on the bed, then showed me an English book. Another tap on the door brought five more children into the room, who stopped to shake my hand as they entered, then they piled onto the bed all at once. Through all the giggles, I took time to learn their names first; Then, we opened the book as we all lay on the bed together; I was in the middle. Each of them read the English words under the pictures, laughing and giggling as they used English conversation for the first time outside of the classroom at school. If one knew the English word from memory, they would speak it out quickly to beat the others to it. After finishing the book, the children explored the different things I brought and had placed on the dresser. They beckoned me to teach them what they were called when holding my things up, they asked, "What?" I'd tell them the English word for it, which they would all repeat. Then the giggles began as they felt the new words on their tongues. They laughed at the curlers I brought when they found out what they were. I couldn't bring my curling iron because the plugs are different here. They tried my lotions and sprays and were especially interested in my deodorant when they smelled it. After I told them what it was for, they

laughed as they named the people who needed it. I told them I put deodorant in the bags for everyone. They had never seen a lot of the things before because they couldn't afford the luxuries from the store.

Ziva was lovely; she grabbed my hand and pulled when she wanted to do something different, then they all pulled my arms, requiring me to get up. Ziva led, holding my hand, and the others followed as we climbed another flight of stairs that led to the flat roof. From our high perch, I could see the city for miles. There was a bit of smog, but I could still see several minarets on the mosques in various neighborhoods, other people on their rooftops, and many boys and girls flying small paper kites. The following day, after breakfast, I went to the rooftop again when the children came to me and excitedly pulled my arms to go with them. I understood their joy when I saw the sky filled with thousands of paper kites flying in celebration of Basant, the kite flying festival, celebrated in several countries in and around India. It was amazing to see hundreds of thousands of kites, mostly the same size and color, flipping back and forth in the sky for miles.

Some kites escaped and flew alone, lost until someone on some other roof caught them, restrung them, and returned them into the air. After a while, Mo came to the roof to watch. He told me that this thin wire was sometimes used instead of a string and was quite dangerous. The government tried to ban kite wire usage, especially after they continuously hit electric poles, causing sparking, then shorting out the neighborhood electricity for a day or more. Some people, he said, have been shocked and seriously hurt. He recalled hearing of a few deaths as well. I was waved at, time after time, when different neighbors noticed me from their roof. Some called out to ask the kids about me. The kids smiled and were proud to show me off. A short time Later.

I was told to go downstairs to greet my company; everyone paraded down after me. We found the greeting area full of mothers and young daughters who had discovered that an American was on a roof watching kites, and they wanted to know more. Each person politely shook my hand. Some had a trinket to offer, and one mother brought a treat to share. The rest of the time, girls giggled together and stared, afraid to speak even if they did have English skills. Mo came in later to translate a few questions for me, then answered them back in Punjabi, their local language. They all stood at once after the brief visit and left. Different groups came several times during the next two weeks. It appeared as though I was going to meet the entire neighborhood. I was interrupted at least twice a day to receive guests.

The children either followed me or always knew where to find me for opportunities to spend time with me. They would say, "Come," "Teach me," or "What is this?" in English. They used English words more often and told me the Punjabi word. When the older girls visited, they also tried all my sprays, lotion, and makeup. I did not see any sanitary pads in the bathrooms, and I was curious, so I asked them how they managed. They still used cloth rags. My mother told me about using them when she was a young girl in the 1940s. The girls told me that on the roof, they hung the wash to dry from a clothesline. Personal things would be placed beneath the outer garments so no one can see them. The moral code was solid in all they did.

I initiated a trip two days later to a small shop where I had Anum buy a case of disposable pads for all the teenage girls in both houses. Mo told her to continue buying them with the money he regularly sent her. On our way home, we saw an overloaded wagon toppled in the street. The horse that pulled the wagon was lying on its side, wet, sweaty, and struggling, not having enough strength to get up. The poor horse was obviously overworked from pulling the tall and heavy load. We were the second car back; I had a clear view as I watched a man standing over the horse suddenly pull a gun from his shalwar and shot the horse in the street right in front of us. It was shocking; I was really sad watching that. Later that evening, I spoke with the girls, who were delighted about the case of personal products they received. They knew about them, but it was a luxury, and no one thought to get pads for them.

Although shy, the older girls now attempted to speak English more often, and I knew they wanted to talk with me. The girls asked me to hang out with me on the roof that evening. I got to know the four oldest girls better after spending many enjoyable evenings with them. We talked about cooking, and I told them I would teach them how to make pancakes and homemade syrup. The family enjoyed eating them the next morning. In the afternoon, I introduced the younger children to card games like War and Crazy Eights, with cards I brought from home. They brought out a Parcheesi board, and we played that for hours. I enjoyed the kids, and they enjoyed having fun with me. When I went to the roof with the kids daily, I often saw boys playing cricket in the streets below and little girls chasing each other, giggling with delight. Older girls who have reached puberty must stay in the house or inside their gates. Only adult males, females, or young children went outside the gate in the daytime. Older, unmarried females must be accompanied by another adult or parent. Women rarely leave the property alone unless they go to their neighbors. They go out late at night for walks in groups if they live

in a quiet neighborhood. The few people I saw in the neighborhood in the evenings were entire families or mothers and their children getting some exercise. Many nights I went out for walks with the girls instead of Anum. They told me they were happy walking with me and felt freer to talk and be themselves. They were bolder, less reserved, and much more enjoyable.

The following day, I was dressed like a Pakistani in a shalwar kameez, on loan from Anum; I was going out for the first time since I arrived. First, Mo and Hajji took me to a bazaar, then we went to the biggest market in the city. We returned some fabric that Hajji and Mo bought for me the day before. Anum thought I should have a few shalwar kameezes of my own made by a local tailor. In the market, I could exchange the material for patterns I liked. I also bought gifts and some beautiful shawls for my family. As the vendor laid out twenty shawls, he precisely offset and neatly staggered them so I could easily select each color and pattern from the top corner. After paying, I was offered a warm Coke in a short, old-fashioned light-green bottle with a paper straw. It felt like I was revisiting the '50s. Men with Uzis slung over their shoulders patrolled the crowded market. They didn't look friendly, but they smiled at me as I passed. Workers in the market walked past me with heavy loads of cloth slung over their backs like human donkeys. So many young boys worked for a living, even on school days, and I wondered why their parents did not make them go to school.

We went out again the next day. Our taxi was a rickshaw, a motorcycle refitted with canopied seating in the back, so it had three wheels. I had not contacted anyone back home yet, so I needed to do that. Mo took me to a nearby shop a few days later, and I emailed my parents, sisters, and daughters. Next, we went to the old part of the city. The buildings and streets are very narrow. It was so dusty, it was difficult to recognize whether the road was stone, tar, or dirt. The townhouses rise three to five stories high. I saw food, leather, socks, and other general merchandise for sale in shops on the streets below the owner's apartments. Sewerage ran down the sides of each road. Hajji showed me where he sold his fruit, next to his friend's shop. Later, back in my room, Ziva tapped on the door, then sat on my bed looking very sad. She said, in broken English, that she didn't like it when I had to go to the markets or anywhere else because she missed me and couldn't go with me. She said, "I'm too young, I can't go there, and I've never seen the markets before." Finally, she asked if I would tell Mo to let her come with me next time. I said, "Yes, I'll make sure you go. I'll tell him you are coming with me whenever I go."

Mo's younger cousin, Hassan, was ten and lived in the attached house with his parents, little brother, and three sisters. He had become attached to me and wanted to be with me daily. I spent a lot of time with him, helping him as he desperately wanted to learn English fluently. Mo approached me with the idea that perhaps we might adopt Hassan and bring him to live with us, but a lawyer told him that a mother adopting a Pakistani child in the USA has to be Muslim. Hassan was so sad when he heard this. However, I have always remained close to him. He is now married and has children.

I woke up to a noisy symphony the following day. I tried to pick each sound out of the orchestra. The first sound that got my attention was the thunder far away in the distance. Next, I heard birds happily chirping, roosters crowing, and our kids playing on the patio below me; the boys in the street were playing cricket. I heard the balloon man who was constantly blowing a bulbous horn like a clown and, of course, the never-ending sounds of the large horn section; the automobiles likely trying to pass the carts of animals in a hurry to be first. Other vendors were announcing whatever they had to sell using a microphone; one vendor sold his wares to the tune of "Silent Night." The putt-putt sounds of motorcycles came next, then "Baaah," the neighbor's goat was probably hungry. Next, I heard the family downstairs chatting away and, finally, the muezzin, who called the time of prayer, just before silence. Entertainment over, I decided to get up. After breakfast, I went to the living room, where Mo gathered the family and was standing, talking to the girls on the sofa. "You are going to the market with them," he said as I walked in, then he instructed the older girls and his aunt on how to take care of me in public. He ordered them to surround me on each side, one in front, leading the way. He wasn't going, but he was anxious about sending me without him. When a tonga, a horse-drawn carriage, came, and we went through the gate to climb aboard. Mo turned to the younger Ziva and said, "There's room for one more. Get in." She giggled happily and jumped aboard to sit in front of me on a box. Everyone laughed as she sat down and joked about her seat right behind the horse's fat butt; still, she was grinning from ear to ear.

At the market, the girls were surprised at people's reactions to me. I saw a gorgeous turquoise shalwar kameez that I wanted to buy. As the clerk spoke to me in English, Ayesha said, "No," then took my arm and led me away. The clerk behind us spoke out, and then we walked back. After Ayesha bargained with him, we bought what I wanted for a much lower price. Two hours later, everyone was ready for ice cream, so we sat in the ice cream parlor, then Ayesha hired another

tonga to take us back home. It was later in the day, and the traffic was heavy, like everywhere else. There appeared to be more animals than usual, pulling their carts through the streets. A donkey cut us off, and the driver yanked the reins quickly. Ziva fell forward into the horse's rear end. The horse pulling a tonga behind us had to stop suddenly, but not before its head came into the rear of our tonga, right into the faces of the three of us sitting in the back of the carriage facing it. We all jumped as the sweaty horse's head came an inch away from our faces.

The next day, Yasser, their neighbor, picked us up in his car to bring us to his wire factory in a village outside the city limits. It was a long ride to the village. I was fascinated by the different sights along the way. The villages are similar to small rural towns, with the dirt streets made smooth by constant tamping from hooves. Most of the residents farmed or worked in the nearby factories. The electronics parts Yasser made were US-grade and shipped to Europe for distribution. We toured each room to watch the process. Yasser enjoyed explaining everything. Later, I asked how much he paid his workers and why I kept seeing young boys working on a school day. He told me the workers make fifty US dollars per month. I said, "They need a raise. I make that in hours, not months." He laughed, then told me, "The children have to work, or their family can't live." I joked to him, "Then pay them more. Next time I come, I expect them to make more money." He laughed with wide eyes as I teased him. "The boys get off early to go to Koran school for religion," Yasser said, "then they have chores to do at home. The men work from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m."

Next, we toured a nearby farm, where Yasser showed me the foods they grew, like wheat, corn, potatoes, and cauliflower. Marijuana was being produced at this farm, along with vegetables. On the way out of the village, I saw a small complex of round-shaped huts made with long, thin tree branches randomly tied together with rope. Yasser told me destitute people lived in these houses and worked at the factories nearby, including his. The various colors, textures, and patterns of square rags gave privacy and protection from the hot sun. They were tied at each corner, creating a large round sheet draped entirely over the frame. Bands of cloth strips connected the frame from the top to the ground and were tied at intersections on each branch so the sheet of rags didn't blow off. The weather is mostly hot and dry, but there is a rainy season. There was a mungee (a hand-woven cot on a metal frame) outside each house; I assumed one was inside for sleeping. It was both ingenious and disturbing that people lived this way.

We stopped to eat at an outdoor restaurant when we returned to the city. Yasser ordered spicy lamb kabobs that were skewered and

grilled on a rack in the handmade fire pit. I got a burger made of ground lamb. Still, it was just as spicy and challenging for me to eat. We were discussing the day until I commented about a police truck loaded in the back with four officers carrying huge assault rifles driving toward an open area beside the restaurant. Yasser told me how the police are always stealing money from people. Then, after a while, a car of young men pulled up with their radio blaring music loudly. We watched as the police truck came up behind them. First, the officers got out and spoke with the young men, and next, I saw each of them reach into their shalwar pocket and hand paper rupees to the police before they left. My brother recently told me a similar story about someone he knew in Mexico. When the Mexican police were doing a spot-check in traffic, and pulled an intoxicated American guy aside, he offered the officer an American twenty-dollar bill to let him go. The officer put the twenty dollars in his pocket and then put his hand out again, saying- "You're drunker than that." The police in third-world countries are as corrupt as the criminals.

The children came looking for me the following morning to bring me outside. They kept saying, "Camel," and then grabbed my arm. The fully grown camel lived temporarily at the neighbor's house inside his gate. The man slept on a mungee beside the camel, who knelt next to him for the night. The owner never left the camel alone. I patted him several times during the week when the owner took him for a walk. I learned about the foods and Indian spices used to make delicious meals. Most people eat with their hands using roti, a type of flatbread similar to naan but made with wheat and chickpea flour. Unlike naan, roti is unleavened. Everyone sits in a circle on a sheet placed on the floor in the dining room or the living room, especially if they have company. Food dishes are placed in the center so everyone can lean in to take bites of food using roti as a utensil. There is no need for a separate plate. Pieces are broken off the round flatbread and then pinched between their thumb and forefinger to form a scoop to hold the food, then placed it in their mouth. Mo instructed his aunt on how to cook for me because the food was too spicy for my taste. She had to separate a portion and use fewer spices and peppers for me. I like spicy food, but their taste for chili peppers is ridiculously hot and far beyond my tolerance.

Many weddings were going on in the neighborhood because it was spring. People blocked the streets to put up tents and bright lights for the traditional wedding celebrations. I was invited to several of these evening events when news of an American being in the neighborhood spread. These events last several hours, so they became

very exhausting for me to go too often; I'm an early riser. My husband explained the traditional marriages in his culture. He said they are arranged through family or friends who might know someone ready for marriage. It's rare to fall in love when males traditionally cannot be alone with females until after the wedding. Their family is always present before marriage, so there will be no questions about immoral behavior. If a family found a couple alone, they would blame their daughter. Some stricter followers alienate their daughters and send them away or indenture them to other people as nannies, maids, or worse. Fathers have stoned their female children for being alone with males, believing it brings shame to the family. To decide the couple's suitability, the two families meet, spend time at each other's houses with the other family members and spouses to determine if they should marry. The parents might decide on suitability with or without the couple present. The girl's parents are more likely to consider their daughter's opinion. Next, a legal contract (nikah) would have to be signed to make it official by the couple, and that is like being engaged, Mo told me, but I would soon find out the truth about Nikah. He told me they cannot consummate their marriage or cohabit until the main wedding event, the Shaadi, which usually occurs within the month. During the days in between, family members on both sides share meals in their homes and get to know each other better. The husband and wife, however, might not have the privilege of getting to know each other and might not be allowed to speak at their parents' discretion.

Girls only dream of having love marriages, but know they will have to marry someone of their family's choosing. Many families allow the couple to speak on the phone to become familiar until the final celebration, the Shaadi, has ended. The new couple is allowed to be alone together for the first time after their Shaadi celebration. Brides choose a particular material for a tailor to make their wedding clothes. Some relatives might pass these beautiful garments down in their family, along with gold jewelry, especially if they cannot afford to get new ones. Many brides choose red or blue brocade-type fabric, often made with gold threads. The groom's family might purchase or pass down 22 or 24 karat gold wedding jewelry to give to the bride. Brides wear a gold nose ring with a gold chain that will attach to gold pierced earrings on one side. Traditional meals, gatherings and other ceremonies, and celebrations for the bride and groom come next.

At a Mehndi party for the bride, friends and family decorate her hands and arms with henna dye. They feed her sweets and give her gifts and money. The bride wears a yellow and green shalwar kameez and keeps her head facing the ground with her dupatta draped over it while others enjoy food and soft drinks. The men also gather and do

similar things to celebrate the marriage. They wear a breastplate decorated with money and ribbons. Their attendees always gift money to them. Marriage celebration parties follow with friends, neighbors, family, music, and fireworks. Pakistan's temperatures are very high, so events start after 9:00 p.m. There is always plenty of food and music. The couple, as the guests of honor, sit apart from the guests. Men and women usually sit separated on different sides, but they can see each couple. Many marriage parties last for days. After the Shaadi event, men dance together. Later, when the celebrations are almost over, male friends might shoot their guns in the air and light fireworks. Hopefully, they do not kill anyone, but that has also happened. The marriage consummation comes after the Shaadi. If they do not get a hotel, the groom's family cleans a bedroom at their home to make it look like a suite, etc., by decorating the floor and bed with everything white for proof of virginity. Sizable red rose petals decorate the bed and floor. If there's any part of a wedding in the neighborhood, no one can sleep.

Funeral traditions are extremely somber but ceremonial as well. After passing, the family immediately cleanses the body; the deceased is dressed in a white cotton garment and placed in a long, woven flat funeral basket. They announce the death from house to house that day, so neighbors could come immediately. Family, friends, and neighbors carry the body in the long basket to a public park in the neighborhood. Women, men, and children mourn, cry, hug, socialize, and pray together. Later the same day, everyone meets at the graveyard for immediate burial; rose petals cover the tomb. The tradition in Islam is that their bodies have to be buried within twenty-four hours of death. Some families and friends camp out at the graveyard. There are different areas in the cemetery for those who want to stay longer. They may bring a tent, tables, and chairs for family gatherings during the next forty days of mourning. People bring food to share meals at the graveyard. A body is never left alone, from death to burial. Mo was surprised that we left our dead alone at the funeral home when he attended my cousin's funeral.

From the rooftop, I noticed more animals in the neighborhood than usual. I laughed when looking down the street and saw many sheep with pink or orange neon paint sprayed on their white wool, had ropes tied to their necks, and were taking little boys for walks. We had two sheep with pink paint on the grounds the following day. Mo's aunt, Mehreem, was returning from Hyderabad the next day. Her husband, Rasheed, and their youngest son were going to the bus station in the city to get her. I asked what time the train came, and they all laughed, saying, "When it gets here." After five and a half hours of waiting at the station, it finally arrived. I made a dinner of roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and stuffing for everyone

that evening. The men went out to buy a few chickens and had them slaughtered and de-feathered on site. I brought cranberry sauce from home and made a cake for dessert using my mother's homemade chocolate mayonnaise cake recipe. The girls spun the sugar by hand with a wooden mixing tool so I could make the frosting. The next evening, I made tacos for the family; again, I brought the ingredients I'd need from home. No one in the house eats beef, so we used ground lamb. Everyone loved them, and no one had heard of tacos before.

Mo and I went out alone that week. In ancient times, the fort was the home of a Mughal-period emperor. We visited an ancient fort, which is now a museum. Several of the rooms held various artifacts and ancient weaponry. The guide took us through and told us the history. There are many beautiful mosques in Pakistan. Mo took me to the mosque in Islamabad. We took off our shoes as we entered. Separate prayer rooms have beautiful tapestries, and some have ornate carved stonework. It was quite a sight to behold, seeing the open areas that hold so many people who pray on small prayer rugs on their knees. King Faisal from Saudi Arabia built the more modern mosque that bears his name in Islamabad; it holds three hundred thousand followers of Islam. Everyone likes to tell about the famous mosques of Pakistan, especially Badshahi Mosque, which is the most famous of the Mughal structures and holds many artifacts of the Prophet Mohammed. This Mosque will hold one hundred thousand people for Eid prayers. Eid is a religious holiday commemorating the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his son to prove his belief in God. Mo told me. The largest mosque, Masjid al-Haram, is in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It holds four million people, and during the hajj, it is filled to capacity. Mo told me that the Kaaba, the black stone structure in the center of the Mosque in Mecca, was built by Abraham and Ishmael.

We went to Anum's house next. The narrow, uneven steps, also made of stone, were hard to climb. We climbed up five floors from the bottom through bedrooms and other living areas to the top floor kitchen and dining room. The roof had a stone overhang but was primarily open to the sky. The kitchen had a two-plate gas burner, where Anum kept a pot of homemade ghee (clarified butter) and freshly made yogurt. Her sink was a red bucket on the floor with a long garden hose with a sprayer as a faucet. They also used a hose with a sprayer in the bathroom, just off the kitchen. Anum stored clean dishes in a basket on the floor. A sheet spread out on the floor under the overhang was our table; we sat in a circle, with several bowls of food and some roti in the center that we shared. We enjoyed a pleasant lunch before Auntie brought us to the children's school for

awards day. The principal asked Mo excitedly if I would pass out the awards and greet the children from all the grades, who were together in a big room.

I shook many little hands and thanked them for such a friendly welcome, then wished them happiness and success in their studies. Hajji picked up Ziva on his way home, and she was also happy to join us. She hated to leave my side. Hajji's son won first prize as the top student in his class. The next day, we went for a ride with Mo's uncles to buy some greenery for the garden beds inside the complex walls. When one vendor saw me, he raised the price. I realized that Mo paid for everything, and everyone, while we were in Pakistan. Mo's uncles made him take me aside and away from them, so I had to get out of the car. Mo and I walked around while they bought what they needed after they moved the car a distance away to a different vendor. Mo and I helped load the car with the shrubs and trees they bought. The vendor stared at me. He probably thought he had missed an opportunity for more money.

The following morning, two gardeners came and pulled weeds inside the gate. They raked and flattened the ground in the gardens inside the walls next to the house. The following morning, a dump truck of loam stood in the street in front of the gate. The gardeners worked from dawn to dusk for several days to spread the topsoil in the gardens, each using a large, wide bowl that they filled by hand and then carried on their heads to empty in the garden beds until the pile was gone. Next, they planted grass seeds and created a garden area for the vegetable seeds I brought with me. I planted them with the kids, who promised to water them daily. Mo also hired a man to paint the house. When the painters came, they brought big bottles of products and some bins; they made paint by hand in the containers, then poured it into buckets to begin their work for the day; they worked almost nonstop until dusk for two weeks until they finished the sidewalls on the three-story house.

Yasser took us to a beautiful public garden. The gorgeous flower gardens had marble pools, beautiful water fountains, topiaries, and greenery. We spent two hours enjoying the beauty. I felt closer and more in love with Mo during this trip. Being in Pakistan was a highlight in my life. I learned so much about his culture. His family was so kind and accommodating, and I always felt special around them. They went out of their way to ensure my happiness, and I enjoyed my visit. I became especially fond of the children and the older teenage girls; they were always excited to have me around. I also enjoyed Mo's childhood friends; they came by in the evenings to sit outside the gate with Mo and talk together. Sometimes I would go out and sit with them. It was enjoyable

for me to get to know them. Sometimes, the neighbor Yasser, and a few of Mo's friends would go out to eat or walk around the park. Yasser had a car so they showed me around the city. One afternoon we drove to the Pakistan-India border. They were curious about life in the United States, so that was most often the topic of conversation. I would have been okay to stay longer. There was much to learn about the history and way of life there. Two years later we would return to Pakistan.

Later in bed, Mo and I talked about his life growing up with his great friends. Mo told me how happy he was to see his Aunt Anum again, saying how important she was to him as a substitute mother. He told me his Aunt Anum was everything to him and "more than a mother to me"; she has always been behind him, guiding him to adulthood and beyond. He loved her so much.

We left the next evening for the USA. Back home, Mo surprised me when he asked if either of my children might be willing to be a surrogate for a child for us. I remembered our conversation before our marriage. Mo was sure he didn't want children. I asked my children, but they each had recently given birth to their fourth child. Neither one of my daughters was willing to become pregnant again, and I didn't blame them. Mo seemed to accept that. Two years later, he wanted for us to go to Pakistan for a more extended, three-month visit before looking for another business. Our tickets were booked for November 2004. Mo told me his aunt had asked him if we would ever have children. He told her I was not able to become pregnant. When we got ready to leave for Pakistan, he said that one of his cousins would surrogate a child for him and asked me to think about it.

It was the last trip to Pakistan I ever made. So many things that I didn't fully understand at the time would change my life forever in the worst of ways. I hope that by now, you cannot wait to read this book. It is a roller Coaster ride of raw pain, emotion, betrayal, fear, and resilience as everything shifts and my world falls apart in the most unbelievable turn of events that one could imagine. Join me on my journey from a blissful romance to survival, enduring a fraudulent marriage, emotional manipulation, and threats of violence while finding the strength to reclaim my life..

From Bliss to This

Target Audience: Fans of emotional narratives, stories of resilience, empowerment, betrayal, manipulation, and self-discovery.

Key Selling Points: Compelling storytelling, emotional depth, exploration of complex relationships and personal growth, powerful portrayal of a woman's fight for independence and self-empowerment in the face of deceit and manipulation, and a poignant reflection on the resilience of the human spirit in the aftermath of chaos.

An incredible non-fiction book from chapter to chapter, a poignant exploration of love, sacrifice, and self-discovery amidst the ruins of broken promises and shattered dreams.

Visit my blog about relationships; it's free and includes information on how to choose a better partner, how to empower yourself in the relationship you have, and offers great advice and tips to make your relationships healthier.

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Email laurainabashir@gmail.com.

Website laurainabashir.net

REVIEWS:

5.0 out of 5 stars

Riveting memoir!

Reviewed in Germany on 12 March 2024

"From Bliss to This" is a riveting memoir that delves deep into the complexities of cross-cultural marriage and the hidden realities of abuse. Lauraina's raw and candid storytelling pulls readers into her tumultuous journey, from the initial allure of love to a chilling descent into deception and danger. Her resilience and strength shine through as she navigates through the darkest moments of her life, ultimately emerging a survivor.

5.0 out of 5 stars

Couldn't put it down!!

Reviewed in the United States on November 9, 2023

A great story!! My heart broke for this courageous woman as she went from feeling so loved to so trapped, helpless, and hurt. Her journey to pull herself from the wreckage and move forward was so inspiring.

5.0 out of 5 stars

From Cultural Bliss to Harrowing Escape: A Woman's Tale of Survival

Reviewed in the United States on January 18, 2024

From Bliss to This isn't your typical memoir. I was swept into a world that began with fascination and love, only to spiral into a chilling narrative of deceit, danger, and resilience. The transition from a happy cultural marriage to a survival against lies and abuse is portrayed with such raw honesty and intensity that it's hard to believe it's a true story. What makes this book stand out is its candid exploration of cultural nuances and the shocking realities of emotional and physical abuse. The author's detailed descriptions of her life experiences in a Muslim culture, the initial fascination, and the subsequent horrific realization of her husband's true nature are both enlightening and alarming.

As I read, I was struck by the protagonist's incredible strength and determination. Her journey from being a victim to a survivor, planning her own way out of a dangerous situation, is not just a story of escape, but of empowerment. It's a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable challenges.

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About the Author



While unpacking my journals from that painful time, I wrote, “From Bliss to This” on a mission to prevent others from experiencing the same heartbreak, raise awareness about the emotional and financial toll of abuse, degradation, isolation, and fear that comes with marriage fraud and green card scams. These things are mentally, emotionally, and physically damaging. You have everything to lose, just like I did. I was raised in New England by old-fashioned parents who taught me to trust and believe in people. But these are different times, and you need to be cautious and more aware than ever ...

Don't mistake charm for character.

Lauraina Bashir

