

# Dancing in the shadow of Alexander

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Dancing in the shadow of Alexander by Mata Raa

Forty years old, single again and ready for something new. Twenty years of marriage out the window, two kids off to college thousands of miles away and my parents' farm to my name; I should be smiling and count my blessings. The world's falling to pieces and I have money in the bank, a home, a car and am debt free: those are things to be happy about in this day and age.

So what that Bob left me for our secretary, sold our ten fast food restaurants and moved to Florida, the sunshine state, to spend the last years of his life playing golf. Who cares that I dropped out of college our sophomore year to have our twins Alicia and Jared. Bob went on to get his B.S. in Business Management while I was busy changing diapers, making him breakfast and dinner seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year until last year. And I should be happy I married the right man, supported him all those years while the business was growing and forgot about my own dreams and wishes. Although I did get my dream Tudor mini mansion which was professionally decorated, I really shouldn't complain; I should be happy, even thrilled the bastard finally left me and I have all this to myself.

I've spent the last few months watching Dr. Phil, The View, Oprah and Tyra telling us newly middle aged single women that there is a life out there waiting for us; we don't need a man in our lives especially if he's just dead weight, that we can do anything we want and be selfish for the first time in our lives but worse of all that forty is the new thirty? And oh I can be a "cougar". Do I want to be a cougar? Do I really want to waltz around town with a twenty something man-child who will make me even more self-conscious about my cellulite and twenty year old stretch marks than Vogue and Cosmo already do? I think those Hollywood people on television trying to tell me what I can or can't do never lived in my shoes and if they did once upon a time, they forgot all about it once they stepped into their Manolo Blahniks and Christian Louboutin's.

I finally stopped watching those talk shows; turned on the DVD player, sat back, relaxed and watched movie after movie all starring my favorite actor Keanu Reeves. Now if he spoke I'd listen.

I still remember the first time I saw him on the beach, wet and sexy in "Point Break". I knew then he was the one for me, my ideal. It was love at first sight and I'd decided I would try to get to Hollywood no matter what. Keanu Reeves was so different from anyone in my town, so exotic and just downright gorgeous! My best friend, Camilla, and I both applied to UCLA together but because it was out of state neither of our parents could really afford for us to go and well I'd met Bob my senior year in high school, followed him to the University of Illinois instead and the rest is history. After months of hibernation Camilla, Milla as I call her, finally came over to unplug the television and threw me in the shower and got me dressed for church bingo with a stop at the hairdressers first: only she could do that.

Milla's been my friend since Sunday school and we've been inseparable since, the two Musketeers', that's what we called ourselves. She's the closest thing I have to a sibling but better cause neither of us ever had to fight for our parent's attention. We've been through everything life has offered us: tornadoes, lightning strikes, first kisses, humiliations, crushes, marriages, births, Christenings and now my divorce. She did everything right: went to college and finished, had more than one boyfriend, married her college sweet heart, had two kids, stayed at home like I did and is still madly in love with Chuck and likely to be until death do they part.

I'm happy for Milla and don't begrudge what life has given her. I made my choices, I can live with the fact some of those choices are tainted with regret but well, they were my choices and time isn't going to change them. Tonight we're going to the Fourth of July church dinner and raffle in honor of Father Haddad, a visiting Maronite priest come all the way from Beirut, Lebanon as a guest of the Catholic diocese and personal friend of our own Monsignor Knight. I never heard of a Maronite outside of Religious Studies in high school until Monsignor Knight brought him up a few months before Bob left me. He'd said Father Haddad had been a friend of his he met while in Rome years ago and wanted to come over for a year from New York. I can tell you the entire church was agog with the idea of having an Arab in our midst. What with 911 and Al Qaeda well it was quite a scandal until Monsignor Knight set us all straight explaining about Maronite Christians and promising us we'd all love Father Haddad who spoke perfect English.

He came all right and he was everything Monsignor Knight said he would be and then some but my world turned topsy turvy and well, a Lebanese priest was the last of my worries and I never did see him until a few weeks ago when Milla dragged me out of the house and got me back to church. Everyone loved him and had invited him around to their houses for supper except me by all accounts. I got to know him a little better at Milla's one night and he did seem a genuine Christian priest even though he was Arab. None of us were too sure but he was a good Christian and there was nothing Al Qaeda about him. That night he and Monsignor Knight put forth their intention of giving a round trip ticket to Beirut, Lebanon as the grand prize for the yearly Fourth of July picnic and dinner raffle. They wanted to know if we thought anyone would want a trip to Lebanon and go for two weeks to stay with Father's family? Milla's girls thought it would be cool but we weren't so sure and reluctantly agreed they could always include it and see what happened.

I went home that night thinking what an absolutely ridiculous idea it was. Who in their right mind would claim a ticket like that? Nobody I knew. They only just bombed that place six years ago.

Everyone saw it on CNN. Father Haddad said he thought it would be nice for someone from our parish to visit the churches in Lebanon and learn about the Lebanese people. Ridiculous. If anyone were going to go to the Middle East it would be to visit the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, not war torn Lebanon. I might go on a lark if Milla came with me, why not? But there weren't too many people like me in this town. I was laughing about it when I turned on the DVD to finish watching Keanu Reeves's film, *The Lake House*. He sure is handsome and so exotic I thought as I lay back on my pillow with my laptop in hand idly looking up to see any latest news on him. Nothing. I hit the Wikipedia page, read the first few lines for the millionth time and followed on down to his early life. And there it hit me. Beirut, Lebanon. Keanu Reeves was born in Beirut, Lebanon. I jumped up and those words high lighted in blue glowed huge in my eyes. Beirut, Lebanon I read aloud to myself. I looked at him on my television screen and for the first time in months I felt a tingle of hope. I never noticed before he was born in Beirut, Lebanon? I decided then and there if the good Lord were on my side he would make me the winner of the grand prize raffle going to Beirut. Surely this was a sign. I never did make it to Hollywood but just maybe a trip to Beirut, Lebanon would get me close to him?

The next day I walked into Doris's office, the church secretary, and bought \$100.00 worth of those raffle tickets much to the shock of JoEllenn Ostermeier who was standing behind me when I bought them.

"Why Leanne Loper, for heaven's sakes what are you doing?" JoEllenn scoffed.

"Well not that it's any of your business JoEllenn but I'm buying raffle tickets! Or is my divorcee money not any good for the church?"

"Well. I didn't mean that Leanne. I just meant well, do you realize that just means you're upping your chances of winning that trip to Beirut!"

"Well now, I hadn't thought of that, do you really think so?"

JoEllenn looked at me in shock mixed with worry, which nearly made me laugh.

"You know nobody's buying raffle tickets this year on account no one really wants to win that ticket to Lebanon. I mean did you hear of such a thing? With the bombing and those Al Qaeda Hezbollah people running around, well I never! What an idea to put in plane tickets to that place! I don't know what's gotten into Monsignor!"

"Now, JoEllenn, you take that back! I know for a fact you had Monsignor and Father Haddad at your house for a roast and you've been telling everyone what a wonderful man Father Haddad is!" Doris finally said putting in her two cents worth. "You're not being very Christian JoEllenn. I'm sure Father Haddad wouldn't have suggested it if he thought one of our parishioners might get hurt. From what he says it's stable over there and very nice. It's just like here JoEllenn except they speak Arab. And don't you forget the Lord Jesus came from the Middle East! He wasn't born in the greater Midwest! Don't you forget it. And just to let you know we've actually sold a record number of tickets so nothing's changed since last year's raffle!" she finally said giving her best Mother Superior look of disapproval as she took my money.

"Well, I'm just buying all these tickets to help the church JoEllenn. It's all for a good cause and if the good Lord thinks I should go to Lebanon, well then I'll go. I trust in God and I trust in Father's judgment. As Doris said, he wouldn't put his parishioners into harm's way. I can't think of a better summer vacation than Lebanon."

With that I walked away with my head held high. I wondered to myself what JoEllenn would really think if she knew God or Father had nothing to do with my purchase. I had only impure thoughts of Keanu having his way with me in Lebanon, which pushed me to buy all those tickets. Thinking of that I laughed aloud as I got into my car and drove home.

Sure enough as I walked in the door, the phone was ringing. I didn't even have a chance to say hello before Milla started talking.

"Lelo, what are you doing? What has gotten into your head you buying all those tickets for the raffle?"

"Well, why not?" I answered Milla who always called me Lelo (Le short for Leanne and lo short for Loper) whenever she thought I was doing something feather-brained.

"Why not? I'll tell you why not. Have you not seen that place? It's been bombed and those Hezbollah people running around there like maniacs and people assassinating their President. I'll give you a million reasons why not! It's dangerous!"

She got me a bit worried for a second before I answered with false confidence, "Well, I don't think Monsignor would put us in harms way Milla. You've seen Father Haddad, he's not a maniac; he's clean shaved, got green eyes and well not very Arab looking. He went to University in Europe and well by judging him I think it must be safe over there."

“Safe, ahuh. Sure. That’s why they’re always bombing over there and shooting guns into Israel for no reason. All those innocent people dying all the time.”

“I don’t know about that but yes, I watch CNN too and I’ve seen it but well, I don’t think Father Haddad’s family lives in the dangerous part.”

“Lelo, the whole country is dangerous! Don’t you remember all those Americans being ferried outta there when all that bombing was going on?”

“Well Milla, just hold your horses, I haven’t even won the darn tickets! So you just calm down here okay?”

Milla laughed, “Oh Lelo, you’re the only sister I’ve ever had and yes you’re right. I’m jumping the gun as usual. Let’s just hope the Lord loves you and you don’t win tonight. I don’t know what I’d do if you actually went there or worse if anything happened to you! If another one of those attacks happens there, I just might have to come in with the Illinois National Reserve to get you out of there!”

“Well let’s hope it won’t come to that. Anyway I have another reason for wanting to go and if you love me you really will wish me luck.”

“Wish you luck? For what other reason?”

“Well now don’t you get uppity but you won’t believe what I found out. Keanu Reeves was born in Beirut, Lebanon! Can you believe it? Did you know that?”

“What?” she screeched in my ear, “That’s what this is all about? You buying those tickets because you think Keanu Reeves is going to be in Lebanon?”

She yelled so loud, she knocked me from my standing position down into my chair where I landed with a thump.

“Lelo, I know you’ve been through a lot with Bob and all but goin’ to Lebanon cause you think

you're going to run into Keanu Reeves is absolutely insane! I thought I'd heard it all but this is ludicrous! Keanu Reeves does NOT live in Lebanon. He lives in some hotel or garage in Hollywood or New York or something, not in Lebanon!!!"

She made me cringe as I sat at my kitchen table listening to her go on about Keanu and Lebanon. I wasn't just going to Lebanon for Keanu, sure he was ninety percent of the reason but I also just wanted to get out of here. I wanted to go somewhere new and be around people I didn't know and who didn't know I'd just been divorced.

"Milla, I'm not going there just for Keanu. That's just an extra good reason is all, a funny coincidence. I need to get away from here for a little while. I just want to go somewhere no one knows my business and just see something new."

"See something new? Well go down to Florida then or New Orleans or Mexico if you must, but Lebanon, that is just, just so strange! We don't know anyone who's ever been there!"

"Father Haddad."

"I mean one of our own kind Lelo. Somebody we know. That's just so far away and can I call you there? Are there computers there? Cell phones? Are you even going to sleep in a proper house? There's that rich English socialite woman married to some Arab/Pakistani man who was living in a house with mud floors! I mean do they have floors? Can you really imagine yourself staying in a house without proper floors?"

"I don't know but if I win the ticket I'll find out and tell you all about it. How about that?"

"Well I'm going to pray right now you don't win tonight! So, to change the subject, what dress are you wearing? I hope you wear that new cream dress we bought at Frontenac last week."

"Yes, I was thinking of wearing it, not that anyone will notice but well I feel pretty in it."

"You are pretty in it, it shows your little figure just beautifully and you certainly won't go unnoticed. Chuck's business partner out of Chicago is down for a few days and he'll be coming tonight. So I want you to look your best Lelo, he's very handsome and divorced about two years now. So you be on your best behavior." She said happily.

I rolled my eyes and answered accordingly and shook my head as I hung up and got ready for dinner. There's nothing Milla would love more than to get me married off to a nice Doctor from Chicago, maybe that wouldn't be so bad. I hadn't been this excited in years for a Fourth of July church dinner. The last time was when I was sixteen and a boy named Everett came out to visit his elderly aunt for the Fourth. I prayed he'd kiss me under the fireworks and the praying worked and he did. Sadly that summer romance disappeared as fast as the fireworks display when he left three days later back to Arizona. I don't think I ever prayed so much in my life since then or since the time Milla and I wanted to go to UCLA. I remembered those prayers were never answered so I re-doubled my efforts now in hopes the Lord would hear me. I couldn't help but think how his Inbox must be so full of spam from silly people like me asking him for things that just weren't that important. It really wasn't fair on God that I asked for something so trivial. Perhaps if more people like myself stopped asking him for silly wishes, he'd have time to take care of real business. I looked in the mirror and told myself I was a selfish silly old fool and put on my mascara, prayed one last time anyway and added a twirl in hopes my prayer would make it to the Lords "Wall".

Sure enough when I walked into the church's rose garden to our table there sat the usual Church friends along with one new face; a handsome face too. Chuck stood up, as did his business partner, Dr. Bryce Kennedy, no relation to the Boston Kennedy's, who introduced him as he pulled out my chair. I could have killed Milla but she just sat there looking beautiful with her flowing blonde highlights cascading around her face showcasing the biggest smile ever. I had to admit Bryce Kennedy was very handsome: tall, chestnut hair, blue eyes and a beautiful warm smile. He worked with Chuck in the Medical supply business they both started up together years ago. He was a Dr. but was injured and decided to get into the medical supply business instead which is how he and Chuck met. I'd known all about him but never had the chance to meet him the few times he came down to our little town. He was very handsome and I had to thank Milla for making me put on my new cream dress which did make me look as pretty as I felt wearing it.

"So you're Leanne? I've heard all about you for years off and on." He said softly.

"Yes, the one and only; guilty as charged. What ever she told you I did, I probably did and I've done my penance for it for years now." I laughed.

"She did say you had a sense of humor. I see despite your recent circumstances you still haven't lost your love of laughter."

"Well, Bryce, I did the crying thing and the feeling sorry thing until Milla came to my rescue kicking and screaming. But yes, you're right, I'm still who I am and if Bob didn't like me well my friends do and I'm sure someone else will too." I said giving him a wink.

He laughed as he handed me my glass of wine and said he was looking forward to an enjoyable meal in good company. I had to admit, I couldn't keep my eyes off of him and enjoyed his tales of being a doctor in West Africa with Mercy Ships along with a stint he did with Doctors without Borders in Burma. I was a captivated audience as he told me about the suffering women in Uganda and families he saved fleeing persecution in Burma. I'd never met anyone like him in all my life; he was so worldly, so Indiana Jones. He made me forget about the dangers of Lebanon and gave me courage should I win. He'd never been to Lebanon but reassured me should I go I had nothing to be scared of but myself. He told me he'd heard wonderful stories about the country and had Lebanese friends in Chicago who were lovely people and I should be prepared for a lovely surprise if I should win the tickets. I wanted him to tell Milla all he'd said but she was too busy talking to people on her half of the table to pay too much attention to what Bryce was saying to me.

"So, what are your Lebanese friends like?"

"Mouna and Dani? Well she's quite literally one of the most stunningly beautiful women I've ever seen in my life who is completely devoted to her husband. Dani's an optometrist and they own several eye glass stores in and around Chicago as well as his practice. They're wonderful people with wonderful children who are all away at University now: one is at Yale and the other at Wellesley. You would like Mouna; she has a wonderful heart. I think they're going back soon for a family wedding or something but they always go back a few weeks in summer to visit their families."

I listened to him explain in more detail about Dani and Mouna and felt miles away from such a woman. She sounded so accomplished, educated and married which I no longer was. How Bryce thought I could have anything in common with her baffled me. The picture he painted was of a well respected and educated family who had nothing to do with the images I had in my mind of people in Lebanon. I had to admit to myself that I hadn't really put too much thought into what I may be letting myself in for if I really did win these tickets. Perhaps it was because I knew deep down that there was no real chance of my winning these tickets but I hoped meekly to myself. In the middle of Bryce's story about how he met Dani, Monsignor Knight got up on stage to announce the beginning of the raffle. I turned away from Bryce and rummaged through my purse for my tickets and prayed silently to myself before Monsignor began spinning the wheel.

The raffle seemed to go on forever and sure enough I did win a prize: a dinner for two at the Lakeshore Lodge. Everyone laughed and some people whistled as I walked up to receive my gift certificate.

"Any man would be happy to escort you there for dinner." Bryce said half laughing.

"And what makes you think I'd be taking a man with me? This is the 21st century, I'm planning on

taking a woman!" I laughed back winking toward Milla.

"Oh no you won't! Not when there's a handsome eligible man you can take instead of me." Milla giggled leaning over Bryce.

Nothing would make Milla happier than to have me married off as soon as possible. I laughed, but deep down inside I knew six months was just too soon. I didn't want anyone in my life, not now. Bryce Kennedy was very handsome, very eligible and available but I wasn't. He was nice, I had the distinct feeling he was also not the type to jump the gun. If anything should happen, he would wait his time and well, in any case, he wouldn't have a choice because I just wasn't available. Finally the grand prize was about to be given. They spun the wheel and I watched the tickets turn round and round as I prayed for one of my ninety-nine numbers to be called.

"Zero, zero, one, five, one, six, five."

That had to be a joke; my numbers started at sixty and went up to one, six, zero. I didn't win! My heart ached and I very seriously wanted to cry. Milla looked over at me anxiously as the numbers were read out and I shook my head no.

"Thank God for that! The Lord heard my prayers after all." She sighed with relief.

I couldn't say anything as I looked around the outdoor hall to see who had won. It took a while but Mrs. Hammond, a seventy eight year old widow and JoEllenn's elderly aunt, finally got up and accepted her prize with a smile and a little joke about staying at Father Haddad's family home in a town she couldn't pronounce called Zouk Mikael but she called it Souk Michael. Everyone laughed and applauded as she went back to her seat.

"I'm guessing a dinner for two at the Lakeshore doesn't seem very appetizing to you now." Bryce whispered in my ear.

I looked at Bryce's handsome face and gave him a defeated smile.

"No. Not really."

"Well, if ever you're up in the Chicago area, I'd be happy to take you out for Lebanese food. The next best thing and I guarantee you'll love it!"

"You're a very nice man, very thoughtful. Maybe one day I'll take you up on that offer."

"I hope so." He said with a warm smile.

The music started and people were getting up to dance but I wasn't in the mood. I excused myself from our table and went to the Ladies Room to cry. Sure enough as I was washing my hands JoEllenn came walking in.

"Well JoEllenn, congratulations to your aunt. She must be very excited." I managed to say with warmth as I blinked the last of my tears away with a flutter.

"Yes she is Leanne. She's never won anything in her life; she's very excited about winning a grand prize. But... Well..." she hesitated, looking toward the door.

"What?" I asked her as she waited for the others to get out and made sure we were alone.

"Well Leanne, now you know she just can't go! She can't! It's too dangerous and well she's nearly eighty and can't get around very well. Of course I can't go either, Ed just wouldn't hear of either of us going truthfully. So, we were wondering Leanne if you would like to have the tickets instead? I mean you wanted to go. Don't ya? Why? I don't know but well, nobody at our table wants them either and I saw you come here and thought I'd come and ask you. Would you take them?" She begged as she pulled the tickets out of her purse and thrust them in my hands as if it were burning her.

I stared at her stunned and took the envelope into my hands.

"You must be joking JoEllenn. Of course I want those tickets! You know I do. But are you sure?" I said astonished and barely able to contain my joy.

"Of course I'm sure, we're sure. None of us want to go and well Aunt Maybelle just isn't up to it but

she is excited about winning them. Go on, you take the tickets. Just one thing: if anything happens to you over there I don't want you cursing me or blaming me, you hear? Nor do I want that crazy Camilla coming after me either!" She said as she gave me a quick hug and ran out the door back to their table.

I watched her rush out the door then turned toward the mirror once again and let out a whoop as more tears filled my eyes but this time for joy and my smile was back on my face as I thanked God for listening. I walked out that bathroom door and floated to Mrs. Hammond's side to thank her in person and sat with them a few minutes as they all said they thought I was crazy and how dangerous it all was but they hoped God would be with me during the trip. I walked back to our table with a big smile and immediately took in Milla's face. She had been worried I was heart broken and I could see now she was relieved, I was okay.

"Thank goodness you're back to your old self. I thought you went to the bathroom to slit your wrists." She laughed.

"Oh no. I went to get my tickets."

"What are you talking about?"

I pulled out the tickets to Lebanon and showed them my prize. I thought Milla was going to have a heart attack, all the blood drained from her face. Chuck let out a small gasp of surprise and everyone else was stunned with the exception of Bryce who was thrilled.

"Why that's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

"Isn't it just? I went to the bathroom to slit my wrists and would you believe JoEllenn came in after me and asked me if I'd take the tickets. And voila, I'm going to Lebanon!"

"Lelo! You can't!" Milla bellowed assertively.

"Why not?" I answered hotly adding, "I need some adventure in my life. Milla, of all the people you should know that this is just what I need!"

Milla got up and motioned for me to stand by the Dogwood tree near the bandstand muttering for me not to air my private thoughts in front of everyone as we walked.

“Now you listen here Lelo. We’re not sixteen anymore and you can’t just go off and do a crazy fool thing like this! You have responsibilities.”

“Not sixteen? I wish I were! That was about the last time I did anything fool hardy and fun! Of all the people I know, you should know I need some fun! I’ve spent all my adult life being a wife, a mother, and a part time accountant and giving, giving, giving! And as for responsibilities, well, I’ve been dumped Milla, the kids are off to college and I’m tired of crying and I’m going to have me an adventure and some fun!”

“Lelo. I’m not saying not to have fun. Why do you think I asked Chuck to have Bryce come down this week? I wanted him to meet you and maybe for you to have fun. With him! Not going off to Lebanon!”

“But I don’t want another man. Dr. Kennedy is very nice and everything perfect but I don’t want him. Not now. I need this trip to Lebanon. Course I’m scared but I need something completely different to what we know. I just need to get away.” I answered taking her hands in mine.

“I know but couldn’t you just get away up to Chicago? I just don’t understand why you have to go all the way to Lebanon. I’ll be worried sick about you!”

“I know but don’t worry. I’ll be in God’s hands.”

“God’s hands? He didn’t give you the tickets.”

“No he didn’t. But he did give them to someone whom he knew wouldn’t take them.”

Milla rolled her eyes. “Oh for pities’ sakes, well I guess you’re right,” she paused looking at me, “Lord you do worry me. I’ve been anxious these past six months about your state of mind. You just haven’t been yourself since the divorce went through.” She said looking into my eyes and then resignedly smiled while pulling me in for a sisterly hug.

“Well that’s in the past now, I guess. So you’re going to Lebanon!” she squealed in joy like our old teenage selves.

“Yes! I’m going to Lebanon and right into Keanu’s lovin’ arms!” I laughed back as we hugged again.

I knew in her heart Milla did understand. She realized there was no point holding me back and talking sense into me. So in our true musketeer way, we just squealed like teenagers and hugged. She was worried about me but this was a sign from God. I had to go. Maybe I’d meet Keanu Reeves after all and if not well maybe something wonderful would happen that only he knew. All I knew was I wanted to go, I’d push my fears and prejudices aside and would go with my eyes wide open along with eyes at the back of my head.

## LEBANON

The weeks flew by after the fourth and I found myself having a crash course in ancient history. I located my old history and art history books from my first year at university. I enjoyed re-reading about the Phoenicians (Canaanites), who ruled from 1200 BC to 539 BC in modern day Lebanon. Alexander the Great had conquered Heliopolis and Tyre, both in Lebanon, which he considered one of his greatest triumphs. Heliopolis or Baalbek as it is known today, had the largest ancient temple of Jupiter in the ancient world and still had one of the only totally intact Temple’s of the Roman era, the temple of Bacchus. I would most definitely have to see that. There was so much about Lebanon I’d never known about or forgotten, so much for them to be proud of with their rich history. Cuneiform writing was started there by the Phoenicians along with the fact that the alphabet as we know it today is thought to have its roots in the Phoenician “phonetic” alphabet. They made their wealth in trade, at first supplying Egypt with Cedar wood whose trees grew in abundance in the hills as well as wine. They made most of their wealth trading Tyrian purple, a violet-purple dye derived from the Murex sea snails shell that lived in their waters. The purple was sold to Greece to color the garments of their ruling elite. In fact, it was the Greeks who gave them their name Phoenicians from the word phoinikeia that is the Greek word for purple. I reveled in my reading of ancient history and art history along with reading everything I could find about Lebanon on Google and Wikipedia. I’d forgotten what it was like to be in school, I really did love University. It was a difficult decision to give it up for children and marriage but that was such a long time ago I forgot how much I’d missed and even worse how much I’d loved it. I would never trade my twins for anything but I would have liked to finish my education so I could have shared my knowledge with them. I read on my own about subjects that interested me but it just wasn’t the same.

The twins had decided to stay away this summer. Alicia was working at Disneyland while Jared was working at the San Diego zoo. I didn’t blame either of them for not wanting to come back to our broken home. They were both thrilled I was going off somewhere exotic and out there. Jared

laughed and told me he met a Lebanese girl in one of his classes who was the hottest thing he'd ever seen. Alicia just wanted me to take lots of pictures and put them on Facebook if I could? She thought it was radical and cool to have a mom going off to Lebanon for no reason at all but just to check it out. She admitted that a few of her sophisticated well travelled friends thought I was very cool which made her feel so Californian with a hip mom like theirs. Suddenly I went from bored, tired, divorced housewife/mom to cool, hip and well travelled mom? It was a thrill to know the twins approved and were happy about it. They'd had quite a shock when their father told us over Thanksgiving dinner that he'd been to the lawyers, drawn up divorce papers, split everything fifty-fifty and took care of the kids college tuitions and was in love with Lynette our secretary of fifteen years! The kids didn't come home for Christmas or this summer but in all honesty who could blame them? After months of somber phone calls it was the first time the kids were happy to hear my voice and were chatting happily to me on Facebook proudly announcing on their respective Walls, their mom was going to Lebanon.

Father Haddad had been to my house a few times to inform me about his family and where I would be staying. Zouk Mikael, the "City for Peace" voted by UNESCO out of 70 other candidates from all over the world. He told me it was a beautiful village up in the hills just north of Beirut about fifteen minutes drive. I would be living in his sister's home and his younger brother and niece would show me around Beirut. Unfortunately Father Haddad couldn't be there but his brother and niece would greet me at the airport. He assured me they spoke perfect English and would be at my service during the entire duration of my stay. His brother Nazeem worked in jewelry while his niece, Maria, was attending the American University in Beirut studying English Literature. I saw their photos Father had in his wallet. His young niece, Maria, was beautiful as was his sister Dominique who was my age and married with two boys. She worked with her husband in a women's retail shop in downtown Beirut. Father Haddad was very kind and so intelligent. I was stunned to come to this realization one afternoon when he'd come by for cake and coffee. I'd never really listened to him outside of Church but having him in my home talking to me about life, politics and religion well I suddenly realized he was unbelievably bright. He told me all his brothers and sisters had gone to University either in France, California or Lebanon. I hadn't imagined Arabs really going to school out here or anywhere? I don't know what I thought. I'm not stupid of course I knew Arabs went to school in America but I never really thought of it? I've never met one in my town or my school and well until Jared mentioned the Lebanese beauty in his class the kids had never known any Middle Eastern kids. I started to feel slightly ignorant. I felt even worse when he told me his brother, sisters, nieces and nephews all spoke fluent Arab, English and French? He told me it was the law in Lebanon so I needn't worry about not speaking the language because I had three to pick from that everyone spoke. He also gave me some hints on clothing but mostly to wear what I wear here at home and just take one or two long sleeved items for going into a mosque should I wish to. With all this information, I packed conservative clothing, took all my make up, deodorant, toothpaste, hair spray; the works, just in case I couldn't buy these things over there.

Armed with my passport Milla drove me up to Chicago and we stayed in a hotel one night before my flight. I was tingling with excitement as we got dressed to go out for dinner with Bryce who'd insisted he take us out to dinner before my flight. He took us out for pizza?

"I hope you don't mind but I thought since you're going to Lebanon, I needn't take you out for what will probably be second rate Lebanese food. So, instead I thought you might miss a good

Chicago style pizza when you're over there!" He laughed.

"Too right, I'll miss that along with a good old fashioned barbecue!"

"Are you ready for your first adventure out of the United States?" he asked.

"I think so, yes, I am! I'll be happy once we land. I'm not one for flying so I'll be happy once my feet are on the ground."

"Yes and as soon as you land I want an email or phone call right away sister!" Milla chimed in clinking beers.

That send off pizza was a lot of fun. Bryce was a very handsome and caring man. For a moment I wished I was alone with him but there would be time for that when I came back. The next day Milla walked me to the security check and gave me a teary kiss and hug goodbye making me promise to always keep a look out in front of me and at the back of my head. She didn't want any bombs blowing me up. Israel's President Netanyahu had threatened to bomb Beirut over something I'd no idea about. Something about Hezbollah, so war again was possibly imminent. I had to admit I was worried but I knew God was watching over me and nothing would happen. I had absolute faith Israel wouldn't bomb me. Milla tried again to tell me not to go but everything was said and done, so there was no turning back. People had wished me luck, the kids were waiting for my first photos from Lebanon and the Haddad family were waiting for me on the other side. And just maybe so was Keanu Reeves, wishful thinking.

I hate flying but once we changed to Middle East Airlines in Paris I was even more scared. Everyone who boarded was Arab. I walked into that plane and they were all speaking Arabic, including the air hosts and hostesses. One of them saw my fear, I think, and spoke to me in perfect English as she pointed me toward my seat. With a sigh of relief I walked back and was impressed with this airline, it sure beat the previous plane. These seats were wider than the usual planes and all leather with a television behind every seat for individual viewing. I was amazed. A young man sat next to me, and a woman, my age, sat on the aisle. I looked out the window and silently prayed for this plane not to blow up. Reason did creep in to tell me it was highly unlikely this plane full of Arabs would blow up. The young man next to me I later learned was studying anthropology at the Sorbonne in Paris while the woman was an anesthetist in Paris and going home to visit family for a few weeks. I sat there listening to them both prattle on in Arabic and sometimes French. I felt like an idiot sitting next to them, as I couldn't understand a word they were saying. I also noticed that although they were wearing jeans and shirts, they looked different some how. There was something definitely European about them, they simply just didn't look American. They weren't American but if you just looked at them on the street you'd say they could pass for anyone in Chicago. The woman had lovely golden blonde hair with blue eyes and fair skin while the young man was a very handsome, tall, green-eyed, dark haired dream. I was ashamed

of myself for thinking it but they looked just like us. A few of the people I saw walking up and down the aisles were the kind of Arabs I'd seen on CNN with some women wearing scarves. I didn't see anyone in a burkha, which I'd expected. When the food came out it was amazing; French cuisine served on porcelain plates with proper steel cutlery. The host was wearing white gloves to serve us which just gave it all such an air of noblesse. I felt like I was eating at a restaurant instead of in an airplane full of strange Arabs thirty thousand plus feet in the air. This was all new to me and I was impressed. My fear of what to expect began to abate a bit but still I didn't know what to expect on the other side. I just remembered that Beirut International Airport had been bombed by the Israeli air force and I was just hoping they wouldn't be repeating that today. I couldn't stop wondering about the hundreds of people at the airport waiting for flights out to some lovely vacation place or others coming home to see family. The thought made me cringe and I decided to think of something else.

"So is this your first trip to Lebanon?" The young man next to me asked.

"Yes, yes it is. I won this trip in a church raffle and well here I am."

"You're Christian then? You won this in a raffle? Wow that is amazing and very forward thinking for your church. Amazing."

"Well our Monsignor is very open minded and quite a radical in our community. But no, his good friend who is a Maronite priest has been visiting for a few months in our parish and offered this trip for our Fourth of July raffle."

"Oh, how interesting. What's his name, the Maronite priest I mean?"

"Father Haddad. He's from Zouk Michael or something like that. Sorry if I mispronounced it."

"No, don't worry, you did well. Father Haddad. I know him; he has a niece, Maria, I think? He went away a few years ago to New York? Is that where you are from?"

"No, I'm from Illinois but yes he was in New York and now in Illinois. Maria is his niece; she's meeting me at the airport. So you know him?"

"I don't but my family does. My uncle and he went to school together at St. Joseph's College in

Antourra just next to Zouk, which is where I went with his niece Maria. His family is a very respected Christian family.”

“You are staying in Zouk Mikael?” the woman asked leaning over. “That is a very lovely town. You will love it; it’s very picturesque with a lot of history. You are very fortunate to stay in such a lovely area during your visit to our country.” She added.

They made me feel better. I didn’t know what to imagine in my head although I had seen photos of Zouk and it did look beautiful. Houses made of stone with flowerpots overflowing with flowers. I couldn’t wait to see it. I was getting anxious albeit I was very tired and could do with a warm bath and sleep.

I saw the deep azure blue Mediterranean below and began to get excited. I could see the coast, the cities ahead, the mountains and miles and miles of white sandy beaches that stretched out into the sea changing its color from deep azure blue to a dazzling bright turquoise. We were landing soon. It looked much like the California coast, dry with palm trees, buildings that glistened in the sun and a beautiful coastline of white sandy beaches that spread into the sea on one side while on the other soil, apartment buildings and houses stretched up a beautiful mountainous backdrop. The skies were blue and even though I was in an air-conditioned plane I could feel the heat. I noticed a few torn down, partially torn down or blown up buildings that looked half built or half blown up, the kind of buildings you see in films about Tijuana; kind of third world in appearance.

Once we landed I collected my things and followed everyone out single file. I walked to a line that said Non-Residents. Most everyone around me was speaking Arabic or French, I felt like a complete foreigner. The airport looked third world; I could see it might have been blown up three years ago. Once up at the immigration passport control, the officer asked for my passport, looked at me while I looked at the army man in fatigues carrying what looked like a Kalashnikov over his shoulder and asked me if I’d been to Israel within the past six months? I told him no. He flipped through my passport, stamped and waived me on. I got my luggage and followed all the others out the door. The first thing that hit me was the blazing heat; I thought I would fall back. Then I saw the sign, Leanne, held over a beautiful young woman’s head: Maria. We saw each other instantly and she gave a loud squeal of delight as she ran toward me with a warm hug and a kiss on each cheek to welcome me followed by Nazeh, her equally handsome uncle who hugged and kissed me like a long lost relative.

“Welcome to Lebanon!” Maria squealed aloud.

“Yes welcome to Lebanon!” Repeated Nazeh happily looking into my eyes, “We are so proud to have you as our guest for the next ten days. We hope you will enjoy your stay with us.”

He was a sight. I'd seen his photo and thought he was handsome but in real life he was more. He was thirty-eight, a diamond dealer working out of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and was home for a month to visit family. He was tall, slender with milk chocolate skin and dark black hair with the most beautiful light green-yellow eyes I'd ever seen. I couldn't pull my eyes away from his; they were mesmerizing.

"My sister is so excited to have you at her home. She went home early to clean up and prepare an early dinner and get the house ready just for you. She is so excited getting everything just right for our American visitor. I think she's making you hamburgers for dinner so you feel at home." he said with a gentle laugh.

We walked outside and the heat and humidity me stopping me in my tracks for a second. I needed that second to adjust from the cool interior to this ferocious heat outside. It wasn't actually humid, just so intensely hot that sweat instantly dripped from my pores. All I could see was concrete, asphalt in the parking lot, it was so hot you'd think the asphalt would melt. I could see too it wasn't very pretty out in the open: nothing but concrete all around and Nazeh apologized that the parking lot had not been fully re-built after the war. He walked me to their car, a Cadillac Escalade? Nazeh noticed my surprise.

"Haven't you ever seen a Cadillac Escalade before? It's American!"

"Oh yes! Of course, I just didn't expect to see one here, that's all."

Nazeh roared out in laughter, "I'm sure there is a lot here in Lebanon you won't expect to see but you will!"

Maria was jumping around next to me full of nervous energy as she sat in the middle of the back seat leaning forward. She reminded me a lot of Alicia but she was such an exotic beauty. She wore beautiful clothes and her long cascading hair was stunning, everything about her was just perfect. She had eyes shaped like almonds and her eye make up was like those old Hollywood films of Arabian princesses, smoky and beautiful. Nazeh was perfectly dressed and coiffed as well. They were both wearing the latest European styles and both smelled heavenly. They were as beautiful, clean and shiny as the Escalade.

Maria was full of questions and wanted to know all about my children. They were the same age and she couldn't stop peppering me with questions. I told her Alicia was at UC Santa Barbra while Jared was at UC San Diego. She and Nazeh both spoke to me in perfect English with American

accents. I just couldn't get over that, they really spoke such beautiful English? We drove through downtown Beirut and past the house of parliament and the military guards that were guarding the area through control points, well only one, into Beirut. Nazeh informed me they were there to stop any suicide bombers or any bombs that may come into Beirut; also that security was heightened due to the latest threats from Netanyahu. The little bit of Beirut city we drove through was beautiful, I saw some ancient pillars next to an old Church, St. George's, I was told and a mosque right next to that as we whizzed through the modern and clean streets of downtown Beirut. Nazeh promised we would come back another day but now it was straight to Zouk Mikael. We drove along like what looked to me as a make shift freeway. It was bumper-to-bumper cars; Nazeh apologized for the rush hour traffic but promised me it wouldn't last long. I nearly fainted as I saw this highway was clearly only for four lanes but somehow these drivers had made it a six lane highway with people walking along, crossing from one side to the other and even bicycles. \*

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Leanne &#x201c;Lelo&#x201d; Loper is at a crossroads in her life. Recently divorced and with two children who are quickly becoming independent adults, she spends her days watching chat shows and Keanu Reeves films. When by chance she is offered the opportunity to go to Lebanon on an unexpected holiday she hopes for an adventure, and maybe a glimpse of her heartthrob, Keanu, at his birthplace. What she doesn't bargain for is the chance to explore a rich and ancient culture, come face to face with her own prejudices and those of others, and find love in the most unexpected place.

But what effect will her expanded outlook, her updated style, plans to attend university and, most shockingly of all, the presence of her Lebanese lover have on her established small town life back home? Will her children accept Lelo for who she is? Will her best friend? What sacrifices will Lelo have to make in order to find happiness &#x2013; and love?

Dancing in the Shadow of Alexander is a spirited and fearless examination of culture, culture shock and the politics of war and prejudice. It's also a gently comic and humane love story featuring a fallible yet ultra-modern heroine.

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