CHAPTER 7

Life as an Expat: Adjusting to a Muslim Country

(1984-1987)

7.1 A Mistake or Maybe Not

Living and working in Saudi Arabia presented unexpected contradictions. On one hand, the financial benefits were undeniable—generous salary, tax-free income, and free housing and healthcare. The job seemed like a perfect solution to my financial struggles, particularly with student loans from the UH program weighing on me.

However, this financial benefit came with cultural and social challenges. Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islam shaped every aspect of daily life, from day-to-day interactions to acceptable behaviors. While I enjoyed the comfort of an American-style lifestyle on the compound—complete with freedom for my children to roam and play outside, first-rate American-curriculum schools, and opportunities to relax and socialize with friends—outside of the compound, the societal expectations were vastly different. Women adhered to strict dress codes, gender segregation was enforced, and personal freedoms were limited by religious and legal norms.

Despite the financial rewards, daily life felt stifling. Even simple activities, like leaving the compound to eat at a fast-food restaurant, required navigating strict gender segregation and cultural restrictions. The contrast between a lucrative job and the oppressive, controlled society served as a harsh reality check. Moreover, the legal system, heavily shaped by Sharia law, meant that questioning, let alone challenging, societal norms could lead to severe repercussions. On Fridays, if you could stomach it, you might see beheadings or the severing of hands in the town center. The penalties for murder and theft were, to put it mildly, brutal. Yet, on the flip side, the city was relatively safe to navigate. The contradictions in the "Magic Kingdom," as we sarcastically called the country, were impossible to ignore.

In retrospect, the decision to move to Saudi Arabia was a pragmatic one, offering financial and family security, something I eventually came to terms with. It also forced me to navigate the complex balance between financial success and the personal and cultural sacrifices needed in such a restrictive society. The experience highlighted the contradictions of living in a place where modernity and conservatism collide.

Ultimately, moving to Saudi Arabia marked the beginning of a 37-year journey working across the Middle East and North Africa. During this time, I would learn to navigate the complexities and contradictions within Arab societies. My first experience in Jeddah, though challenging, set the stage for this process of adaptation and laid the foundation for future professional relationships with Arab colleagues. As I learned to function within culturally restrictive environments, this first job, despite its difficulties, became the starting point for my long career in the region.

Soon after settling into my new life in Jeddah, I was faced with an early and unforgettable lesson—an all-too-common Arab predicament: over-promising followed by under-delivering. During my Raytheon job interview, I had asked the Saudi representative on the panel how long it would take for my family to join me in Jeddah, as they would temporarily be living with my parents. He assured me they would arrive within a couple of weeks, setting

that expectation in place as I left for my new role. However, reality proved far different. I arrived in mid-June, and two months later, when my family still hadn't arrived, I grew frustrated with the constant excuses and delays. Finally, in August, I marched into the main admin office on the Raytheon compound and declared that I was quitting.

Looking back, that first encounter with the bureaucratic hurdles of an Arab country should have been a clear sign of the challenges I would face countless times over the rest of my time working across the Middle East and North Africa. These issues became something I came to expect—and ultimately learned to navigate—allowing me to avoid the anxiety and stress I initially felt in the face of the region's red tape. In fact, by the time I took on leadership roles overseeing large-scale projects across the Middle East, where I often dealt with both Arab colleagues and complex bureaucracies, I had become skilled at anticipating challenges and engaging in ways that consistently led to positive outcomes.

If family separation had been the only challenge, I faced upon arriving in Jeddah, I might have been able to manage it. However, there was more disappointment in store as I began my first full-time job after earning a master's degree. My hopes of applying my newly acquired teaching knowledge and expertise were quickly shattered when I realized the teaching position was a dead end. But before delving into that, let me highlight the positive aspects of my time in Jeddah—the very reasons I would ultimately spend three years in the kingdom.

Arriving in June, I was at once surprised and impressed with my living accommodations on the compound, called Rayville. Because I had a family, I was assigned a spacious, fully furnished two-story townhouse that was both huge and modern. Situated in a newly built section of the compound, I was the first to move into townhouse #78, which added to my excitement. I soon looked forward to my family arriving in a week or two to live in this townhouse and experience life within the compound community.

The kitchen was equipped with the latest appliances, and the cupboards were stocked with dishes, pots, and pans—truly impressive. The dining room in the middle of the townhouse featured an atrium with a glass ceiling, giving the space an airy, open feel and providing a perfect spot for indoor plants. There were even two living rooms: one at the front of the townhouse and another at the back. While it didn't apply to us, I now realize that the back living room was likely designed for the women of the family, a common practice in conservative Muslim households. The three upstairs bedrooms were spacious and well-furnished, making it easy to imagine my family living there comfortably. You could literally move into this townhouse and only need to buy groceries to start living there. It was a massive upgrade from sleeping on a mattress on the floor in the small apartments we rented in Hawaii and Minnesota.

The streets of Rayville were wide, lined with speed bumps, and perfect for children to ride bikes safely. Nearby, well-equipped playgrounds and ample open space provided room for kids to roam and play freely. It was a wonderfully secure environment, ideal for young children to explore and enjoy their childhood. This setting filled me with optimism about our new life. The walled compound itself boasted an Olympic-size swimming pool, recreational facilities, a cafeteria, and social areas that fostered a strong sense of community. It was a comfortable living space for a diverse mix of residents, from families to single professionals. With its own security and easy access to essential services and schools, it felt like a little slice of America.

On the flip side, though, what I didn't know at the time, but would come to realize later, was that it was also a place rife with gossip and intrigue. The close-knit community tended to circulate stories, which often spiraled into a web of rumors and misunderstandings. Despite this, it was a great place for a young family, with its safe streets and playgrounds offering a fun, secure environment for the kids to spend their time.

Approximately 400 individuals resided on the compound, all part of the Raytheon team responsible for providing the advanced Hawke air defense

system to the Saudis. This diverse group included engineers, technicians, HR staff, and their families, all working together to ensure the effectiveness and reliability of air defense operations at a Saudi base located outside of Jeddah. On the base about ten miles from the compound in the desert, a separate school was built to support the air defense facilities and equipment, employing around 50 English teachers and 20 technical instructors to train young Saudis in both language and the technical skills essential for operating this air defense system.

A rather odd dynamic existed between the long-term Raytheon employees and those of us English teachers on shorter, two-year contracts. Despite living in close proximity, we rarely interacted with the Raytheon staff, even during occasional social events on the compound. This division may have been partly due to our different backgrounds. The Raytheon technicians were predominantly ex-military, as the Hawke air defense system was exclusively used by the U.S. Army. Meanwhile, the Raytheon HR staff, often from the company's headquarters in Massachusetts, didn't identify with us. Our education backgrounds were distinct, and even our work attire set us apart: English teachers wore dress shirts, slacks, and ties, while the technicians sported jeans and coveralls.

Additionally, at least half of the English teaching staff identified as gay, which, though illegal in the Kingdom, was generally tolerated as long as there were no teacher-student relationships. This added another layer of separation, further distinguishing our group from the Raytheon employees and contributing to the subtle yet palpable distance between us. In many ways, you could sum up the dynamic by saying that we teachers were tolerated because the Saudis needed our ability to develop the students' language skills to the point where they could understand their technical instructors. While we were necessary, we were also kept at arm's length, which was actually fine with us as well. Unsurprisingly, teachers tended to socialize primarily with each other, and mixed gatherings with non-teachers were rare.

During my time at the ADFI English School, training young Saudi men proved to be an immense challenge, largely due to the limitations of the Saudi education system. Traditionally focused on rote memorization through religious schooling centered on the Koran, Saudi students were ill-equipped for the demands of learning a second language, let alone the advanced technical skills needed to use an air defense system. The transition from English language instruction to mastering complex technology was insurmountable. Without a solid foundation in formal education, the goal of transferring air defense operations to local personnel appeared unrealistic, yet the contract between Raytheon and the Saudi government included this handover requirement and the need for English language instruction meant a large contingent of American teachers found lucrative jobs at the ADFI.

To complicate matters, when I arrived, I was one of only two teachers with a master's degree in language teaching. While all teachers held bachelor's degrees, very few had formal training in modern language teaching. It quickly became clear that I was in a high-paying, dead-end position. Raytheon offered no real support or prioritization for quality training; instead, the longer it took to develop a cadre of Saudis capable of operating the air defense system, the more contract extensions the company secured with the Saudi government, ultimately profiting significantly from this arrangement. It was a win-win for Raytheon but lose-lose for us teachers, who found ourselves stuck in an unrewarding teaching situation with no opportunity for professional growth or job advancement.

The Saudis, as an oil-rich nation, seemed indifferent—perhaps even oblivious—to costs. They were fixated on prioritizing paper results over genuine learning. This focus led to an emphasis on teaching to weekly paper-based tests rather than fostering real language skills. Students were essentially coached to pass exams, with pass marks set at a low 50%, rather than learning to use English effectively. I was appalled, but I quickly realized that employing modern teaching methods was futile in an environment where many students were unmotivated and, at times, openly hostile toward a foreign teacher. If a student disliked a teacher or felt the instructor

wasn't "helping" them succeed on those tests, they could easily fabricate a complaint and submit it to the Saudi school director, which would often result in a swift dismissal and a forced return to the U.S.

During my first year, more than half of the staff—over 25 teachers—left due to such complaints. The stress of this environment alone was enough to push teachers into conforming to the system, resorting to rote methods just to survive. One teacher, Ray Willis, who had played professional basketball in the NBA, employed an unconventional method: he would write the letters A, B, C, and D on the blackboard, and when each question in the audio portion of a test was read, he'd stand under the correct letter. I first learned about this "method" when a student suggested I try it too. For someone coming out of a top-tier master's program, eager to apply innovative teaching techniques, this job was disheartening—far from the fulfilling experience I had envisioned when I first accepted the offer

A dislike for foreign teachers was reinforced by the rigid Islamic influence of the local imams on these students. Recruited from desert tribes, the young students had little understanding of Western society, and this ignorance was compounded every day during noon prayer, a requirement for all students. The imam would lecture on the evils of non-Muslim cultures, warning them to be cautious of the "infidel" teachers in the classroom. I remember discussing these sermons with my colleague Steve Long, who spoke Arabic. He told me what was said in the mosque next to the school, broadcast over loudspeakers. It was striking to see how the students looked when they returned from prayer, reflecting the heavy influence of those sermons.

Soon after arriving, the teaching situation began to bother me, and to make matters worse, the family separation weighed heavily on me. This was only compounded when I called home during those first two months apart. It became increasingly clear that things weren't going well with Miam and the kids. Perhaps it was because I wasn't there to help manage any issues, or perhaps the delays in their departure dashed expectations of an earlier reunion. As the weeks turned into months, I grew frustrated with the

uncertainty and distance. I wasn't entirely sure what was wrong at home, but those phone calls made it clear that the status quo was no longer acceptable.

Two months into my two-year contract, I'd had enough. I was stressed about the teaching situation and feeling increasingly down due to the ongoing separation from my family. One afternoon, after returning from work, I trudged into the HR office and told the guy that if they didn't get my family to Jeddah soon, I would quit. To their credit, they acted quickly and flew my family over shortly after I gave my ultimatum. I suspect they didn't want to lose a teacher with a master's degree, although I can't be certain. The Saudis paid Raytheon over $100,000 annually for each teacher so it was perhaps in their financial interest to get the family over as soon as possible rather than have a teacher quit, which would reflect negatively on their recruitment effort. What I do know is that when I spoke to the HR representative, I expressed my extreme unhappiness—not only about the delay in getting my family over, but also about being misled during the interview regarding how long it would take for the family to arrive. I made it clear in no uncertain terms that I had been misled, and this was causing undue stress for my family.

Once the family arrived in August, I found a renewed focus on making the best of a challenging work situation. Teaching had become the mundane routine of going through the motions and meeting other peoples' expectations. So, I made sure my students passed the paper tests, but as one of the more informed teachers, I also shared my expertise with colleagues, offering advice and suggestions—framed within the context of teaching to the test.

At one point towards the end of my first year, the Saudis began to realize the program's ineffectiveness, and Raytheon leadership shifted the blame to the curriculum. In response, Raytheon contracted with a company called Venture Associates, who sent in a team of curriculum developers to prepare new books for us to use in the classroom. These "experts" isolated themselves and rewrote the course materials without consulting those of us actually

teaching in the classrooms. This was a significant oversight!

When the new books were introduced, I took the lead in challenging their entire approach, collaborating closely with John Bagnole, the other teacher with a master's degree. Together, we prepared a report that was exceptionally concise in explaining how poorly the new curriculum was structured. It was a major embarrassment for the company, especially considering the substantial amount of money paid to Venture. For John and me, however, the report elevated our status as knowledgeable language educators. A couple of years later, John would be in a position to offer me a golden opportunity to teach in a highly rewarding environment. I'll have more to share about that in the next chapter.

In another effort to show my professional teaching capabilities, I volunteered to teach a group of students we referred to as the "Rock Garden." These students had struggled to pass even the simplest tests—ones that others could easily memorize—resulting in a class filled with non-learners who were "recycled" each time they failed. I approached my supervisor with a proposal for a new teaching method, along with my own course materials tailored specifically for them. Using a variety of techniques and my bag of teaching tricks, I aimed to help these students recognize simple words and basic sentences, hoping to break through the barriers that had long hindered their language learning progress.

However, I eventually faced the difficult realization that these students, hailing from desert tribes where inbreeding was prevalent, had exceptionally low IQ levels and therefore were simply not teachable. One student had an extra thumb protruding from the back of his hand, evidently due to inbreeding. Despite their learning difficulties, we developed a strong rapport and had a lot of fun together, even though I ultimately couldn't get them to read beyond a few simple sentences. The Raytheon program supervisor was appreciative of my efforts, especially since no one else wanted to teach the class, and it likely raised my status among the staff as an innovative teacher capable of developing my own teaching materials and methods.

There was one experience at the school that proved to be professionally enriching, at least on a personal level. The school housed two sections: one focused on language study and the other on technical training. One of the instructors in the technical section was using an MS Access database to develop simple computer-based activities. Intrigued by this approach, I reached out to him to explore the possibility of applying similar techniques to English language instruction. After requesting permission to spend my non-teaching hours with him, I began to learn the basics of database commands, discovering how to retrieve and manipulate content in engaging but rather simple ways, given the state of technology back then.

This newfound skill set opened a world of possibilities for me. I was off and running, creating activities that added a layer of interactivity to the traditional teaching methods I had been using. While my developments couldn't be integrated into the official curriculum—specifically the Defense Language Institute (DLI) curriculum from the American Defense Language Institute at Lackland AFB, which was located, incidentally at the same base where I had completed my basic training years earlier—I found myself deeply engrossed in a very early version of e-learning.

This experience not only broke the monotony of traditional teaching but also laid the groundwork for the e-learning initiatives I would later pursue in my career. It was deeply fulfilling to see how technology could enhance the learning experience, making lessons more dynamic and engaging for students. I began to recognize the vast potential of integrating technology into education—an insight that would stay with me long after those early experiments with the database. Despite being in an uninspiring teaching environment, this opportunity became a small but pivotal moment in my professional journey, igniting a passion for innovative teaching methods using technology that I would continue to explore throughout my career.

The reality of the teaching job was far more ordinary than one might expect, though there was a flip side once the teaching day ended. Each workday, we'd "punch in and out" using a factory-style time clock, lining up to insert

our time cards at 7:00 a.m. to start the day and at 2:30 p.m. to clock out. Once I returned home, however, it felt like living two separate lives. I'd take a power nap, waking up to what felt like the start of a new day—my "family day" would begin. I left behind the ADFI teaching and entered the more enjoyable part of the day.

Miam and the kids loved life on the compound, so that became our focus. Playing outdoors or in the recreation center, swimming at the pool, and visiting friends were all common. We'd venture outside of the compound to shop at well-stocked supermarkets, finding fresh fruit and vegetables imported from nearby countries, along with packaged foods from the U.S. and Europe. Miam cooked delicious meals and quickly became known for her excellent Asian cuisine, often asked to cater house parties, including ours. From 3:00 p.m. until late at night, a whole different dynamic unfolded—one that was a stark contrast to the workday routine.

And then there was the nightlife, where house parties were a regular fixture every weekend, with Thursdays and Fridays being the Islamic weekend. Despite alcohol being banned in Saudi Arabia, most people made their own brew or spirits. While alcohol was illegal in the country, it was tolerated on the compound, and making your own was a common practice. These parties provided a much-needed escape from the routine and a way to unwind in an otherwise restrictive environment. Three main methods were used:

1. Non-Alcoholic Beer: People bought non-alcoholic beer and new bottles with stopper caps from supermarkets. They'd pour the beer into these bottles, add yeast, seal them, and wait a few days, creating a concoction they'd name, like "Heuring Brew."
2. Fruit Fermentation: Another method involved buying fruit, dumping it into a tub with water, adding yeast, and letting it ferment for a week or two. This drink became known as "Jeddah Gin."
3. Distillation: The hardcore drinkers set up stills in their apartments to distill homemade whisky. However, this method was risky, with fire hazards and contamination concerns. Improperly distilled spirits could

lead to serious health issues. I avoided any alcohol made this way due to its potency and fear of contamination.

There were always drinking parties every weekend at someone's place, including ours, once the kids were put to sleep upstairs. Our two-level townhouse was ideal for this; we could play loud music in the living room downstairs without disturbing the kids in the bedrooms upstairs. The parties attracted the same crowd of teacher colleagues and spouses, if they were married. Some of them were musicians so they'd set up their instruments and play music into the night while the rest of us drank and socialized with a live rock and roll band to listen to. Regulars at our place included Steve and Rosita Long, who lived in the townhouse next to us, along with Richard Ditzler and Richard Raintree, both single—Richard Ditzler was not yet married, while Richard Raintree was gay. Karl and Kari Anderson, who had arrived in the country around the same time as us, also joined in and shared a car with me. After John Bagnole left for a job in Egypt, he sold his Honda Accord to Karl and me, so we would take turns using it. There was Joe and June Dunford and more who attended our house parties, but their names escape me right now.

There was no shortage of hanky-panky taking place at those parties and within the compound more generally. We used to call Rayville "a little Peyton Place" (an American prime-time soap opera about a fictional small town and the lives, relationships, and scandals of its residents). There was always a mix of intrigue and scandal that often unfolded behind closed doors. Despite the conservative society surrounding us, the compound became a place where people could let loose and indulge in a more liberated social life. Gossip was rampant, and everyone seemed to have a story about the latest romantic entanglement or whispered affair. Miam and I were no different.

One party night, Kari Anderson, a friend and Patti's second-grade teacher, asked me to help her move furniture at her place. We left the party, and I should have known something wasn't right because before I knew it, I found myself seduced. I was highly intoxicated, and the entire encounter

unfolded so quickly that I barely had time to process what had happened. Another incident occurred when our good friend and next door neighbor Rosita Long returned all the gifts we had given her family. She claimed that Miam and her husband had engaged in something untoward, although she wouldn't say what it was. Her husband, Steve, had told me that after I had gone to bed one party night, a group of them had engaged in strip poker and kissing. Each of these experiences illustrated the complex web of relationships we navigated, where the lines between friendship and flirtation often blurred.

Despite the late-night parties, expat life on the compound was also very relaxing, reminiscent of a small American town where everyone knew each other. The swimming pool was open year-round, though we often used it later in the day to avoid the scorching sun. There was playground equipment for younger children, competitive swimming for teenagers, and a nearby baseball field for T-ball and softball games, making the compound a hub for various sports activities. It was a place where families could come together, and the kids had opportunities to stay active and enjoy their free time in a safe, communal environment.

A recreational center with pool tables, a workout room, and a gym was open throughout the day, evenings, and weekends, providing options for relaxation and exercise. But there was something specifically for me—Raytheon had a competitive basketball team that played against other companies in the city. My teaching colleague, Ray Willis, a former Portland Trail Blazers player, was our star player, and we won every game. I joined the team early on and played center, which was exciting! Ray was an excellent shooter, and if he missed, I was skilled at positioning myself for the rebound and making the follow-up shot. Another good friend, Bevo (whose real name was Beverage), also joined the team. He played a tough, hard-nosed game under the basket, so we were solid on both the offensive and defensive ends.

The team camaraderie reminded me of my high school playing days, as it was intensely competitive and filled with a sense of shared purpose. In my

early 30s, I was at the peak of my physical condition, and I approached the game with a maturity I hadn't had back in high school, bringing a new level of focus, strategy, and composure to my play. Looking back, I can honestly say that this basketball experience was easily the most rewarding athletic experience of my life. The combination of camaraderie, competition, and personal growth made it a highlight.

During my first year, the Raytheon HR department set aside a room in the recreational center and installed ten Commodore 64 computers, but they lacked someone to manage their use. Since I had used a PC to write my thesis, I volunteered and quickly became immersed in running the center. These computers were the first to have color screens and featured simple but fun software programs. This role allowed me to engage with technology on a personal level and, when combined with the database activities at work, contributed to a passion that would later play a significant role in my career.

Soon after arriving in August, Patti started kindergarten at a school next to but literally connected to the compound; you could step through a door in the wall and find yourself in the school grounds. The school, NCS, followed an American curriculum and employed American teachers. Patti would also go there for first and second grade, providing her with a first-rate early childhood learning experience at an international school.

In May 1985, Danny was born, and shortly after, I approached the compound doctor about getting a vasectomy, as it was clear that having more children would complicate life as an expat. Dr. Robert Hayes, a general surgeon working as a general practitioner in Rayville's clinic, performed the procedure, even though it wasn't his specialty. His main duties seemed to involve dispensing medications, with Valium being particularly popular among the English teachers. Quite a few of the teachers, especially the single men, struggled with the isolation and depression that came from working at the school and living in the Kingdom.

While my vasectomy was successful, things didn't go as smoothly when Dr. Hayes performed Danny's circumcision. The procedure wasn't done correctly the first time, requiring a do-over. With no other medical options in Jeddah, you simply had to hope the company doctor—Dr. Hayes in this case—would get it right. It was a reminder of the limited healthcare resources in the area, where you had to trust the local doctor, even if they weren't the most experienced in certain procedures.

We easily settled into compound life. When venturing outside of the compound, there wasn't all that much to do for expat families. You could go out to eat at a restaurant, which was always a bit odd because of the gender rules separating single males from females. Each restaurant had a walled off section for families that bachelors were not allowed to enter. It was certainly strange but something you accepted as a local cultural norm.

In the evenings, you could visit the night markets or do some other kinds of shopping, but you had to be mindful of the prayer call timings, as all businesses were required to close for prayer—there were three of them in the late afternoons and evenings. If you happened to be in a store when the call-to-prayer sounded from the loudspeakers at all mosques, you'd be told to wait outside until the prayer was finished. It was a common sight to see Muslims, typically men, streaming to the nearest mosque, while crowds of non-Muslims gathered outside the shops waiting for them to reopen. I lost count of how many times I approached a shop only to hear the loudspeakers blaring, at which point all the doors would slam shut, but after a while I got good at knowing the times between the calls to go shopping outside of the compound.

Another notable consideration was the dress code for women, who had to wear a shroud and veil over their hair whenever in public places. Miam would don this attire whenever we ventured outside the compound, which added another layer of potential anxiety to these trips. If a woman wasn't wearing her this clothing correctly, the religious police would confront her,

and in some cases, they would strike her arms or legs with the sticks they carried. It was a stark reminder of the strict enforcement of Saudi's societal norms.

If you adhered to these regulations, you could venture almost anywhere in an environment that felt consistently safe. At night, the streets came alive with activity, and despite the strict dress code, there was a certain comfort in the order it created. Theft was nearly nonexistent, thanks to severe punishments, which included public beheadings on Fridays for the most serious offenses and the loss of a hand for theft. This complex interplay of freedom and constraint underscored the contrasts inherent in everyday life in the region.

Despite these constraints, we didn't let them deter us from embarking on shopping sprees for oriental rugs. While I never became an expert, I developed a deep appreciation for the beauty and craftsmanship of these hand-woven carpets, particularly those from the poorer Arab countries in the region. Each rug seemed to carry its own story, reflecting the culture and artistry of its makers. The vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and textures captivated me, making the experience of shopping for rugs a joyful escape from the limitations of daily life in the Kingdom. It was a way to connect with the rich heritage of the region, one beautiful piece at a time.

Afghanistan and Pakistan boasted thriving export businesses where local shops displayed an array of stunning designs and intricate patterns. Each carpet seemed to tell a story, reflecting the culture and traditions of its makers. However, it wasn't just those two countries; carpets from various regions showcased their own unique styles. From the vibrant colors of Persian rugs to the geometric designs of tribal weavings, the options were truly endless.

As we explored the shops, I was captivated by the artistry involved in hand-weaving each piece. The skill and time invested in every carpet were clear, and I found myself drawn to the rich textures and vivid hues. I relished the process of selecting rugs that resonated with me, each one representing not

just a beautiful object, but a connection to the cultures and histories behind them. It was a joyful escape from the seriousness of my surroundings, a reminder of the vibrant artistry that has flourished throughout history. In the end, we bought at least ten of various sizes and designs, worth thousands of dollars, destined to last for many years and perhaps even generations.

During the first two years of the contract, we made two international trips. The first was a flight to Bangkok in December 1984. It had been five years since we had left, making this visit a long-awaited opportunity to reconnect with friends and family in Thailand. For Miam, it held particular significance. Over two decades had passed since she had last seen her biological mother, so her father arranged a small family reunion at our hotel in Bangkok. The gathering was deeply memorable and especially meaningful for Miam. For Patti and Joey, the trip provided a chance to connect with a culture that was a significant part of their heritage, offering them a chance to experience the Thai side of their lives.

Then, in April of 1986, I had accrued lots of vacation days since Danny had been born the previous year making it impossible to travel, so we took a trip to Ankara, Turkey for a week-long visit, exploring a culture that offered a more relaxed interpretation of Islam. The vibrant streets, rich history, and welcoming people made our stay truly memorable. As my only prior experience with the Arab world was Saudi Arabia, this trip to Turkey opened my eyes to a much more progressive version of Islam and Arab culture. Turkey's rich historical past, which predated the advent of Islamic traditions, likely played a significant role in shaping its more progressive outlook.

Towards the end of my second year on contract, I faced a significant decision: should I stay for another year? With no other job opportunities on the horizon and a tempting bonus for extending my contract, I weighed my options carefully. Given that Danny was still under a year old, while Patti was starting second grade and Joey was entering kindergarten at an excellent school, I decided to take the extension, pocketing a $10,000 bonus in the process. This choice allowed me to achieve one of my primary goals

for taking the job: paying off my student debt. Despite the challenges of a dismal teaching position, the steady income and bonus provided enough financial relief to make the difficulties of a thankless teaching job in a tough environment more bearable.

Miam, of course, was delighted by the decision. She had developed a close friendship with Nong Cunningham, the Thai wife of a teacher I worked with, Mark Cunningham. Nong had become very attached to Danny as a newborn, stepping in as a nurturing figure in his life. Since she didn't have any children of her own yet, she embraced her role like a second mother to him. Years later, I heard that when she finally did give birth to a baby boy, they named him Danny.

Miam would have happily stayed in Jeddah for years if needed, as her situation was very agreeable. She became well-known in the compound for being an excellent cook of Thai food, even starting her informal catering business, making meals for families and parties. In addition to her culinary talents, she started painting and received instruction from a close friend, June Dunford, and a teacher colleague of mine, Ted McDonald. She developed her skills to the point where she became quite good.

With the extension set for another year, we flew back to Minnesota in July of 1986 and stayed with Mom and Dad at home for nearly three weeks spending precious time with all of the family since it had been two years since we were last back. It was also a chance to introduce Danny to the family. The flight back was a bit of an effort with three kids, one of whom was a little over a year old. We managed to get bulkhead seats so that meant the kids could sleep on the floor in front of us, which worked out fine. As usual, we flew KLM with a plane change at the Amsterdam airport. This would be our regular transit airport for years after since there was a direct flight from Amsterdam to Minneapolis ensuring that we only had one stop on each trip back and forth.

Upon returning to Jeddah, I guess I should confess another reason—beyond family and the lack of another job—for my decision to extend my contract for a third year: I had inadvertently become the unofficial drug dealer for the compound. It sounds crazy, but looking back, it really was. I had stumbled upon something dangerous yet profitable involving pot, once again. At the school where I taught, the janitorial crew was hired through a company that employed Thai workers. I often saw them cleaning the school halls, and over time, I struck up conversations with them in Thai. At some point, I must have mentioned my fondness for Thai stick, and one of the workers later offered to sell me some Thai pot. I jumped at the offer, trusting him, despite knowing the severe penalties for drug offenses in the Kingdom—which included years in prison or even worse.

In hindsight, it was a reckless decision, one that quickly spiraled into something much bigger than I had expected. The allure of making a quick profit clouded my judgment, and I became deeply entangled in a dangerous game. The stakes were incredibly high, given the country's strict laws, yet somehow, it became a part of my life on the compound until I eventually left for another job.

What started as a simple connection with a Thai janitor soon led me to another individual, a key player in smuggling pot into the country on a large scale. At the peak of my involvement, I would travel out into the desert outside Jeddah to meet him and obtain a kilo (2.2 pounds) of high-grade Thai pot. I would bring it back to my townhouse and carefully package it into one-ounce baggies. Initially, I sold these bags only to close friends, but soon, word spread, and they began sharing with others. Before I knew it, I was supplying the entire compound with high-quality Thai pot.

The demand for the Thai pot continued to rise, so I began acquiring kilos more frequently. It was during this time that I discovered an unexpected twist—Peter Putnam, the son-in-law of the Raytheon director of the compound, was one of my regular customers. This revelation made me realize just how far-reaching my little operation had become within the compound.

Interestingly, Peter and I had a separate confrontation that added a twist to the situation. His son had punctured a hole in the canopy of Patti's baby buggy, a Christmas gift, with a sharp object. When Patti told me about it, I went over, grabbed Peter's son by the arm, and nudged him away to express my frustration. Peter soon heard about it and stormed over to confront me, angrily telling me never to touch his kid again. I guess he hadn't smoked weed that day, but in hindsight, I realized I should not have grabbed his kid.

If I had gotten caught with that much pot, or any pot for that matter, I'd have faced years in a horrific Saudi jail, a thought that often loomed over me like a dark cloud. Yet, I continued the operation. I'm sure the HR folks at Rayville were relieved when I left at the end of my third year. They must have known about my activities; there were no secrets in the compound. Its close-knit nature meant everyone knew everyone else's business, and my actions couldn't have gone unnoticed.

A few months into my third year, an unexpected opportunity emerged that would change the course of my career. I remember it clearly, as it coincided with my third time teaching during the holy month of Ramadan. I mention this because, during this time of fasting and prayer, more constraints were placed on teachers. Students, having stayed awake through the night, struggled to stay alert during school hours. Despite these challenges, I had come to accept my work situation, having agreed to a one-year extension.

Then, out of the blue, I received a call from my former colleague, John Bagnole, with an incredible offer. John, the only other colleague at the ADFI with a master's degree, had left our program the year before to take a management role in a U.S. government-funded teacher training project Egypt. He had since been promoted to the top position and was offering me a job as a lecturer at a university in Egypt.

John and I had developed a strong professional bond during our time at the ADFI, often engaging in thoughtful discussions about language teaching and pedagogy. He clearly knew I had the skills and experience necessary to

succeed in this new role, and when he extended the offer, I was ecstatic. The prospect of leaving my stagnant position for a job that aligned more closely with my aspirations filled me with hope and excitement. I signed the two-year contract without hesitation, eager to embrace this new chapter that promised both professional growth and a fresh start for my family.

I would be remiss to end this chapter without reflecting on what it was like living in my first of many Muslim countries. It's important to note that Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, which means it adheres to one of the strictest interpretations of the religion. Take the holy month of Ramadan, for instance. As a non-Muslim, it presented significant challenges, particularly the requirement to refrain from consuming anything in public during daylight fasting hours.

I remember one hot day during my first Ramadan shortly after my family arrived when I bought a can of soda for Joey and sat on the curb in front the local shop outside of the compound. While it was allowed for small kids to drink in public, I made the mistake of reaching down for a quick sip myself. Suddenly, I heard a car screech to a halt, and a Saudi man in a white thobe jumped out, yelling at me and waving his finger. I had inadvertently broken a key social norm, and there I was, being admonished by a random Saudi who just happened to be passing by.

This experience underscored the strict social norms that governed daily life in the Kingdom. It was a reminder of how easily one could stumble into a cultural misstep, highlighting the tension between my personal freedoms and the deeply rooted customs of the society around me. Such moments were not just uncomfortable; they were profound lessons in navigating a world where every action could be scrutinized through a lens of religious observance.

Over the years, I learned to navigate this complex religious landscape, always paying lip service to their beliefs while carefully concealing my own feelings about Islam—and religion in general. I became adept at fitting in, knowing

when to express my views and when to remain silent. I can't tell you how many times an Arab friend would say how much he liked me, but at the same time saying it would even be better if I converted to Islam. Some Arab colleagues gave me books on Islam in an effort to convert me. I'd typically smile and express interest but never commit.

Interestingly, In Saudi society, I was considered to be one level below a Muslim in an unofficial religious faith hierarchy. This is because Christianity preceded Islam but many of the teachings are the same. I always found it intriguing that names from the Bible were names of my students: Jesus was Eisa, Abraham was Ibrahim, and Moses was Musa, among others. This connection highlighted the shared roots of our beliefs, even as it underscored the differences between our faiths.

There was an unspoken hierarchy in Saudi society, with Muslims naturally at the top. As a white Christian, I occupied a status just below that of a Muslim, which created a unique dynamic in my interactions. I often found myself navigating this nuanced landscape, where respect was afforded but also tempered by the awareness of my lower standing. In contrast, Hindus and Buddhists were placed much lower on this unofficial societal ladder, largely because their beliefs did not center on a single god in the same way. This distinction added another layer of complexity to my experience, as I saw how different faiths were perceived and treated within the social fabric of the Kingdom. It made me reflect on the intricate ways in which religion shaped not only personal identities but also social hierarchies, influencing interactions and relationships in profound ways.

This dynamic added another layer to my experience, as I navigated not just cultural differences but also the complexities of perceived religious hierarchy. It was a constant reminder of how deeply embedded these beliefs were in social interactions, shaping everything from daily conversations to the way people perceived and treated one another. Understanding my place within this structure challenged me to reflect on the broader implications of faith and identity, and how they influenced my experience in a society marked by

such distinct lines of distinction.

By the time I found myself in the Middle East, my religious beliefs had undergone several transformations, with Islam being the latest iteration. Growing up, I was a devout Catholic, but my commitment began to waver when I attended public school in St. Michael, where distractions and parties gradually clouded my earlier devotion. However, it wasn't until I lived in a Buddhist country that I truly started questioning the teachings of my Catholic upbringing.

In Thailand, I was confronted by something that challenged my understanding of faith. I struggled to reconcile the idea that virtuous and compassionate Thais—people who embodied kindness and generosity—would be denied entry to heaven simply because they followed a different religious path. I had a pathway to heaven because I had been baptized, but these people would be denied simply because they were born in a country that practiced Buddhism. This experience forced me to reevaluate the concept of morality and worthiness, as well as the criteria by which religious beliefs were judged. It became a turning point, opening my eyes to the complexities of belief systems and the nuances in how faith and goodness are understood.

While I never fully embraced Buddhism, I found solace in certain Buddhist practices, such as mindfulness and meditation. However, my disillusionment with religion deepened when I saw the treatment of Muslims by some Buddhists in Myanmar and southern Thailand. This hypocrisy, where one religious group showed intolerance toward another, deeply troubled me and left me questioning the true nature of faith and compassion.

My latest exposure to Islam, one of the world's major religions, deepened my doubts. I took issue with its rigid doctrines and strict adherence to rigid rules. While I recognized its emphasis on being a moral and upright person, something all major religions do well, the pervasive misogyny within the faith was bothersome. I was troubled by the ways in which women were marginalized. The insistence on traditional gender roles and the limitations

placed on women's rights struck me as deeply unjust.

Observing the practices and contradictions within Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, pushed me toward agnosticism. I saw similar themes of inequality and patriarchal structures across all three major religions. This led me to conclude that none of these religions could claim singular truth. Instead, they appeared to serve as tools for social control and mental conditioning, often at the expense of vulnerable populations. This perspective fueled my doubts and ultimately shaped my journey away from traditional belief systems, highlighting the need for a more equitable and compassionate approach to morality and ethics—one that recognizes the inherent dignity of all individuals race, creed or gender.

I also viewed Buddhism and Islam as opposite ends of a religious continuum. While Buddhism appeared relatively relaxed, it still imposed a level of conformity that bothered me. In contrast, Islam's stringent practices and expectations were overtly demanding. From my perspective, Christianity occupied a middle ground, blending elements of both flexibility and rigidity. This nuanced understanding of these faiths led me to question the underlying purpose and truth of each belief system.

My encounters with these religions profoundly changed my understanding of faith and belief, prompting me to scrutinize their legitimacy. Ultimately, this journey has culminated in my identification as a full-fledged atheist, embracing a worldview grounded in reason and personal experience rather than religious dogma.

Following this rather serious examination of my religious path, I think it's time for a bit of humor to change the tenor of this part of my narrative. I can't help but relate an anecdote that took place on one of the last days at the Rayville compound before leaving for a new job. The kids and I often spent time at the spacious Olympic-sized swimming pool. While at the pool, I decided to dive in—something I had done countless times before. This time, however, I was too close to the shallow end and mistakenly thought I could

bend my body upwards enough to avoid hitting the bottom of the pool.

Well, that plan didn't work out. I scraped my entire face along the pool's floor, resulting in a some rather nasty-looking facial abrasions. The sting of the scrape was sharp, and as I emerged from the water, I couldn't believe what had just happened. Fortunately, the scrape was superficial, a surface wound that would heal quickly. Yet, it felt symbolic, almost like a fitting conclusion to a less-than-enjoyable chapter in my career.

My time in Saudi Arabia had been marked by a blend of professional challenges and cultural avoidance. The injury served as a stark reminder of my struggles in that environment, echoing the discomfort I often felt living in a society that didn't align with my values or beliefs. While I would return to Saudi Arabia many times as a consultant in the future, my feelings about the society and its people always remained strongly negative.

To add insult to injury (no pun intended), I experienced one final Saudi bureaucratic snafu—the last straw that came on the morning of our departure from Jeddah. After months of meticulous planning, I had worked closely with the Rayville Travel Office to arrange around-the-world airline tickets for our family of five. The itinerary was set. We would begin with a flight from Jeddah to Thailand, where we'd spend a week, followed by a trip to Seoul, Korea, to visit Randy and Kim, who had been living there while Randy worked for Samsung. From Seoul, we would fly to Honolulu to reconnect with old friends still living there. Next, we'd catch a flight to Minneapolis to spend time with family before our final leg to Cairo, Egypt via Amsterdam.

It was a dream itinerary—a perfect mix of adventure, reconnection, and family time. I had thought of everything, including hotels and rental cars. But on the day of our departure, we were met with a frustrating surprise: the travel office had made a mistake with our flight connections, changing the flight status of the entire trip. There was no time to sort all of the legs, and I felt utterly powerless. It was the final demonstration of the inefficiencies

and frustrations that had plagued my time in Saudi Arabia. At that moment, I was beyond fed up, realizing that despite all the careful planning, Saudi bureaucracy had found a way to ruin even our departure.

When I checked the flights that morning of departure, I was shocked to discover that all the legs of our journey had somehow been switched from confirmed to open. Since it was a weekend, the travel office was closed, and there was no way to get immediate aid. With no other choice, we headed to the airport, where we found ourselves caught in a frustrating cycle of waiting and fretting. We didn't have confirmed tickets, and the uncertainty added to the growing tension.

After what felt like an eternity, we finally managed to secure seats on the first flight—what a huge sigh of relief that was! But the relief was short-lived. We still had to contact airlines throughout the entire trip to reconfirm each remaining leg of the journey. This process became incredibly time-consuming and stressful, especially since it was peak travel season in the summer. Every stop along the way turned into a logistical challenge, and it felt as though the problems we had faced with the travel office were never truly behind us.

In the end, everything turned out well. We had a wonderful time in Thailand, followed by an enjoyable stay in Korea with Randy and Kim. After that, we flew to Hawaii, where we soaked up the sun and fully embraced the laid-back atmosphere. Our final stop was Minnesota, where we spent time reconnecting with family. Naturally, everyone came by to greet us and catch up.

As the evening arrived, around 6:00 PM, it was time to part ways. Patti went home with Minky and her husband, as Minky was now married. Cindy and Doug took Joey back to their place to play with their son Tyler, who was Joey's age. Everything seemed fine until we realized Danny was missing. The last time anyone remembered seeing him, he was playing in a sandbox behind the backyard. But then, dark clouds suddenly appeared, and within

moments, hail began to fall, followed by a heavy rainstorm that lasted about 10-15 minutes.

As soon as it stopped, Dad and I rushed outside, frantically searching the neighborhood in hopes of finding Danny nearby. At just over two years old, we assumed he couldn't have wandered too far, though our anxiety was heightened by the thought of a small child being caught in the storm. We were particularly concerned about a cornfield behind a row of new houses, beyond the backyard. We scoured the area, calling out his name, the panic mounting with every passing minute.

Then, out of nowhere, a young couple appeared from their house, holding Danny. It turned out he had wandered off from the sandbox in the wrong direction, wearing nothing but a disposable diaper and a tight-fitting t-shirt. The couple explained that as they watched the storm roll in, they had seen him in their front yard just before the hail began. I'm not sure if they were joking, but the first thing they said was that they thought their prayers had been answered because they had been trying to have a baby.

As we took Danny back home, a flood of relief washed over me, but there was also a lingering sense of guilt. It could have turned into a much worse situation, and I was struck by how close we had come to a terrible outcome. The gratitude I felt for the couple's kindness and the safety of my son was overwhelming. Dad, having been the closest to the couple's house, proudly carried Danny back to the house, a look of relief on his face as well. Seeing him hold Danny in his arms, it was clear that the weight of the moment had affected him deeply too. We were all just thankful that the storm had passed in more ways than one.

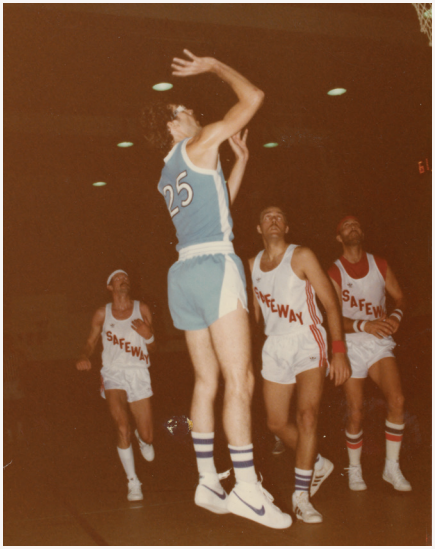
Apart from that harrowing incident, the next two weeks with the family were enjoyable and filled with cherished moments. By then, all of my siblings were married, except for Bunny, and new nephews and nieces were steadily joining the fold. My parents, eventually welcoming a total of 26 grandchildren, were already enjoying what felt like a friendly race to see who

would bring the next addition to the growing family. While it was too early to predict who would win this lighthearted competition, I would later hold the unique distinction of having both the first and the last grandchild. Being part of this ever-expanding family dynamic was heartwarming.

The subtitle of this chapter suggests that the decision to take the Raytheon job was uncertain. In terms of professional fulfillment, it was clearly the wrong choice. However, in terms of providing a stable environment for my family and allowing the kids to thrive, it was the right decision. Ultimately, meeting John Bagnole at the English school, who later helped me secure a better job in Egypt, proved that this decision was, in fact, the right one. It set the stage for the continued progression of my career and opened doors to higher-level educational management opportunities, which you'll read about in the next chapter. So, let's dive in…

Grandpa Borroy: Patti and Joey hug their Thai grandpa in a cozy hotel room in Bangkok, December 1984. It was our first trip back to Thailand since 1979. One of the perks of the job at Raytheon was the opportunity to travel internationally, and naturally, Thailand was at the top of the list.

Buy This One, Dad! Like many expats, buying hand woven carpets was a popular pastime. Danny, sitting atop a pile of rolls, has already picked out the one he likes. Within just six months of arriving, we had already spent $4,000 on these individually crafted masterpieces from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey.



Two More: There's no doubt I made that shot during a competitive game against the Safeway team from across town. I was in my prime during this period of playing, fueled by the skill of an ex-NBA player on our team who handled the ball effortlessly and shot the lights out of the basket. We never lost.

Rock Stars: Kari is already belting out a song, and the band is in full swing early tonight, while Patti poses, and Joey arranges chairs for the audience. This scene was typical as the band members—Karl, Steve, Richard, and Trevor—warmed up for another long night of rock and roll in our living room.

Relaxing With Friends: Since all the townhouses had the same furniture, it's not easy to tell whose place you're at, but I recognize the wall pictures from my neighbors' house, Steve and Rosita, who aren't even in the photo. The guy to my right is Ted, an artist who mentored Miam. She was talented!

Abaya Girl: Wearing an "abaya", the black garment women had to wear outside the compound, Miam is going on a shopping trip. Patti and two neighbor girls check her out while Joey is heading elsewhere to play. Muslim women also had to cover their hair, adding another layer to the attire.

The Backyard: Each townhouse had a small, enclosed area behind it, perfect for growing plants that could survive in the hot desert climate. Patti and Joey are hanging out in our backyard, likely during one of the cooler months of the year—certainly not August, when temperatures often soared above 120°F.

Early Scholars: As they sat reading books on the sofa, Patti had something interesting to share with Joey. Both were fortunate to attend an American-curriculum international school right next to the compound. However, the one downside to their life at the time was the limited opportunity to learn their mom's native language, Thai.

Pool Time: This is a pool on the roof of a hotel in Bangkok. Patti and Joey are like a couple of fish, while I keep Danny afloat. That might be Miam soaking up the sun on the chair in the back, which makes me wonder—who took the picture? The kids learned to swim early thanks to the Rayville pool.

Home From Work: With a row of townhouses in the background, a smiling Steve has just parked his car while Joe and I are ready to head indoors and start the second part of the day. I don't look happy in the moment, but I'll be fine after a nap and something Miam has cooked.

Christmas - 86: Opening presents with the kids for our 1986 Christmas in Jeddah, it looks like Patti is holding a doll tightly while the three of them try to figure out how the small piano works. The tree is beautifully decorated, bringing a sense of holiday spirit to a country that didn't permit other religions.

The Kids: Patti, in a Hmong cap and holding her Cabbage Patch doll in a plastic bag, is quite the character. Meanwhile, Joey wanders in the front yard, enjoying the wide street view--the compound's perk? The kids could roam freely within the walls surrounding 300 houses.