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Found Art

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*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:*

*a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,*

*a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to break down and a time to build up,*

*a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,*

*a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to turn away,*

*a time to search and a time to quit searching,
a time to hold on and a time to let go,*

*a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,*

*a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace. . . .*

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

*He has also set eternity in the human heart;
yet no one can fathom what God has done
from beginning to end.*

my collage

an introduction

At twenty-seven, I married the love of my life and moved to the Middle East. One year later, we returned to the States, changed. This is the story of that journey, the literal journey of living in a foreign culture, of exploring and experiencing a place so incredibly new to me that most of what I knew about myself and the world to that point would be challenged in some way.

While the story is literal, it is also figurative. As you may well know, foreign territory doesn't only exist ten thousand miles away; we can find ourselves in unknown countries without going anywhere.

Like healing, for instance. Healing can be one of the most foreign things we do if we've never been taught how or shown that one could survive the pursuit and process of becoming whole. Grief is similar. If we've never seen how to grieve or never been allowed to or never given ourselves the permission to mourn a deep loss, then grief is foreign to us.

More often than not, we are refugees, working through the seasons of life with foreign soil under our nails, never sure exactly where we belong or how we will manage. We rarely know the language, culture, or climate, and we often have little sense of where God is in our displacement.

For years, I have found solace in the third chapter of the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes. Without its truth, I am sure life would make much less sense to me, especially the spirituality of life.

I believe the author of Ecclesiastes to be right-on with his assessment of our days here on earth: There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, and so on.

We can count on experiencing breakneck joys as well as abysmal defeats. And in spite of all the ups and downs, God is making everything beautiful in its time. The grim stickiness, the author of Ecclesiastes points out, is that we don't always know what God is doing from beginning to end.

I am one of those people who spends much of life agitated and scared and drinking far too much Diet Coke because I typically don't know what God is up to. When I read that he just might be making some beauty out of *my* life, well, that is exceedingly good news. I don't know about you, but that's the kind of news I can really use right now, seeing as how the world feels sideways at least half the time.

My life is wildly all over the place, a collection of all kinds of strange raw material that often makes little sense to me in the moment. The war grieves me. Financial woes keep me up at night. Shame haunts me. Fear keeps me company pretty much around the clock. But what if God were taking all of my life—the glorious and the gutless, the griefs and the gains—and piecing each bit together like a collage so that when finished, something extraordinary would emerge?

If the author of Ecclesiastes is right, as I believe he is, then God is at work even now, creating and recreating an

enduring piece of art from my little old, broken-down, Diet Coke-saturated life. That is what we call *found art*—a genre of art that started umpteen years ago with a guy in New York who took a urinal and cleverly refashioned it into a fountain. Found art is created when odd, disparate, unlikely, even long-abandoned castoffs are put together with other similarly unexpected remnants to create something new and, if all goes as planned, lovely.

Because such art is essentially redemptive, found art is also deeply spiritual, predating even urinal-man in its origins. In God's hands, spit and mud become sight. Dust and rib become humanity. Darkness and void become world. Fishermen become followers. Virgin becomes mother. Water becomes wine. Empty nets become overflowing. Death is somehow miraculously refashioned into life.

When I arrived in the Middle East, I realized I was looking at a half-me, a fragmented soul walking around town. I had given away pieces of myself, convinced the giving had all been for good causes. During this journey, I discovered it was high time I felt the losses, collected the pieces, and reclaimed myself.

That's the thing about these journeys into foreign places. They have a way of making us different if we will let them. We can resist the beauty that is waiting for us, but if we will enter the frightening place—if we will engage ourselves in the context of this new culture—we will see that there was no shortcut to transformation.

Life is most certainly a collage of experience, with all the scraps and secondhand oddments overlaying one another. On a few special occasions we are able to glimpse the art-in-the-making—the found art—that is created from these throwaway bits.

To that end, I invite you to look at this entire book as a collage of sorts:

- a handwritten note from Kuwait
- a braid of fringe from a Persian rug
- an original poem
- a bit of basting thread
- a swatch of black silk from a borrowed *abaya*
- a mesquite leaf
- a Navy SEAL Trident
- a receipt from the Russian-Georgian restaurant on Louisiana Street

Each of these items would be glued down, taped on, and pinned together — snippets and remnants that, in time, have collectively become something beautiful.

As you read my collage, I will be breathing a prayer for you. My prayer is that you will enter the foreign territories, and in them your own art will be found.

Leeana Tankersley

a handwritten note from kuwait

1 uprooting

Somebody unplug the hair dryer, I thought to myself as I stepped out of Bahrain International Airport and into the hot night. Part suffocating humidity and part dry desert wind, the air was vaguely reminiscent of a July I spent in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, visiting my older sister, Laura, and her husband.

In Mississippi, the air was Southern-accent thick, and her prewar, non-air-conditioned house groaned from the sticky heat. Every day I would try in vain to dry my hair—the heat from the dryer mixing with the incessant humidity. That’s exactly what the Bahrain air felt like—dry and wet all at the same time, intolerable as a hair dryer in Hattiesburg.

Similar in feel, but very different in smell. No hint of forthcoming rain or the pungency of fresh-cut grass or the sweat of magnolia trees. The scent was far rawer, certainly different from my hometown San Diego air I had left just thirty-six hours ago with its polite and accommodating ocean breezes. Cigarette smoke, incense-infused musk barely masking sour body odor, and curry all rode the hot wind into my nose, chased by twinges of Gulf water and gasoline.

I was standing in the middle of a new world. In the words of Aldous Huxley, Bahrain would become a “brave new

world” with time. In that first introductory moment, though, everything was just new. The heat, the air, and the smells were all right at home, but clearly I was not. I believe the word is *foreign*. I’m not sure if Bahrain was more foreign to me or I was more foreign to it. We were a strange pair, to be sure.

While the scene outside the terminal was a common one, it felt anything but that to me. White ankle-length *thobes* paced the sidewalk, followed by ground-kissing black *abayas* floating ethereally as though there were no feet under them—a graceful and yet hollow effect I was instantly intrigued by.* The men in their crisp, sheetlike white dresses chatted with each other in Arabic, hailing cabs and smoking cigarettes, one after the other (cabs and cigarettes). The women floated in the background, shrouded in mystery, silently tending to children underfoot.

I was in Bahrain for a number of reasons, you could say, many of which would unfold over time, and none of which I was all that aware of on this first night. The most immediate and obvious reason I’d come to the Middle East was my Navy SEAL husband, Steve, whom I had married eight days earlier in San Diego.

Steve had already been living in Bahrain for a year, the first of a two-year tour. When he finished his first year, he flew home on leave and married me. After a short honeymoon near Lake Tahoe, we hopped on a jet bound for the other side of the world. We lived in Bahrain for the last year of Steve’s tour, while he served as the operations officer of a SEAL Unit on the U.S. base.

I wanted to do the whole thing well. I wanted to be the right kind of wife for such a situation. I wanted to feel normal and at ease in this new place. None of those things were happening

*For Arabic word definitions, see pages 201–203.

the way I had hoped, as I'm a five-foot-nine, fair-skinned, light-eyed blonde woman. I resembled nothing in my immediate surroundings, so slipping into the crowd as if I belonged simply wasn't an option.

In lieu of blending in, I dutifully followed my new husband to a cab, tripping over my bags as I juggled walking, toting luggage, and staring. I felt strangely visible and strangely invisible. I stuck out, but I wasn't getting much attention for it, except from a few young boys staring up at me from full-moon eyes. I wondered what they saw.

I arrived in Bahrain exhausted, numb even. My soul felt as though anesthesia had been poured directly into it. I lived a lifetime in just the anticipation of getting to Bahrain, and once there, I had no energy left to process. The fourteen months leading up to stepping off the plane had taken their toll, leaving me vacant.

When I made eye contact with the row of boys, I realized I was far, far away from home, and the familiar twinge of out-of-placeness crept up slowly at first and then gushed. The awkward adolescent Leeana instantly inhabited me—the one with big feet and big hands who bloomed impossibly early and always felt, with savage restlessness, like the ogre in a forest full of fairies.

Change is horribly uncomfortable. Like the wrong pair of jeans, change pinches and squeezes in the most inconvenient places. A lot of wriggling and writhing is involved. Maybe even some sucking in and prone posturing. Just when you think you've fit in, you realize you're spilling over the top and sides in the worst way. Very, very little ease.

If I would have had the energy on that first night, I might have thought more about where I would fit in, not only in a new

country but in a new marriage, in my relationships back home, in the new relationships I would inevitably forge in Bahrain, in whatever awaited us after this tour was over, in my faith. I might have thought through the transition more carefully and intentionally and acknowledged that loss is the little sister who always tags along with change. All of this was far too much to process in the moment, however, and I succumbed to the disorientation.

A bigger picture—the one I was absolutely unable to see and the one we are all unable to see when we're overwhelmed by the immediate intensity of change—surely existed. In a very short time, I would begin to get glimpses of the divine metanarrative containing some important invitations for me, none of which I would have had the slightest bit of time for in the equilibrium and orientation and familiarity and comfort of my former life in San Diego.

Though I had lost some safety and belonging and planted-ness in this uprooting business, I had gained a great gift—imbalance. Not until I was set on my ear did I begin to see life a bit differently. The bigger picture exists each and every day, but normalcy (and a few other things we will get to) had dulled my senses. Imbalance, once I was able to survive the initial shock of it, began retuning my ears and refocusing my eyes, and life became literally breathtaking—as in, I was finally able to stop and *take* a real, live, sustaining *breath*.

Even on that first night, the new air, the new culture, the new language, the new husband, and the new land all whispered, in the lowest hush, of opportunity. If I could have willed myself to snap out of the mind-numbing exhaustion of change, if I could have willed myself to believe despite my unbelief that this awkward plucking had intention, I might

have been more aware of and open to what was waiting for me. I had no such resources available. Maybe this means I'm disappointingly unspiritual, but I think it probably just means I'm human.

Standing on the curb of the Bahraini airport with luggage in hand, I had no idea that God himself was lurking in the Middle Eastern air, licking his chops (in a good way), just waiting for me to arrive with all my roots exposed and frayed.

Truthfully, I had no idea *anything* was waiting for me . . .

Until I realized *Steve* was! Right next to a Gulf Cab he'd secured. I tried to navigate between the swarm of white *thobes* and black *abayas* that seemed to be dancing around me while I moved, slow motion, in and among them like a lost child winding her way through a band of street performers. They appeared regal and all dressed up. I, on the other hand, didn't, due to my beleaguered heart and jet-lagged tracksuit.

Steve was loading my year's worth of luggage into the trunk. What a good man. He had two wars on his hands—coordinating the SEAL operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. He was incredibly overworked. The world was in chaos. And yet he loaded my bags, every last one of them, as if his only job was to be my husband.

“Capital Centre . . .”

“On the other side of the Pearl Roundabout . . .”

“Past the Gulf Hotel . . .”

“Across the street from Mega Mart . . .”

Steve delivered clues to the cab driver until he finally recognized our destination.

Though well after midnight, the cab driver still blasted Arabic techno with its distinct vocal warbling and clanging tambourines. A copy of the Qur'an slid around on the dash,

while a circle of prayer beads kept time as it hit the windshield from its home on the rearview mirror. The cab driver talked on his cell phone and smoked during the entire drive to Capital Centre.

Soon the Gulf was in view. Then the tall silhouette of the white pearl set in four-story-high prongs that gave the Pearl Roundabout its name. Then the Gulf Hotel, packed with late-night partyers from all over the region. Then a few quick jogs, and we were sitting in front of our building—Capital Centre.

The Nepalese night watchman jumped out of his guard shack as our cab approached. He recognized Steve immediately and hurried back to the metal pole with the long rope tied to it, a less than impenetrable security system but one he takes very seriously. As he tugs at the rope on one end, the cinder block weighting the other end kicks in and the pole swings up so we can pass through into the ten- or twelve-spot parking lot our building shares with a few obscure retail shops.

“*Shukran*,” Steve says, as the watchman helps us unload our bags from the trunk of the cab and reload them into the elevator. Steve slips him a *dinar* or two for his assistance.

“*Shukran*,” the watchman says back, grinning. He appears happy to have Steve back. I’m sure he wonders who I am, though it seems by the grin he has it all figured out.

I, on the other hand, have nothing much figured out. The ropes, clips, fasteners, hooks, and, yes, roots that keep me so well tethered to my spot on the earth have come loose yet again, as they are apt to do in life. It is all I can do just to take in the Bahraini air.