

'I am too young to marry!' she yelled

A child bride, a love affair and two abandoned daughters. Hanan al-Shaykh tells her mother's remarkable story

Hanan al-Shaykh

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In the kitchen attic of my mother's flat in Beirut there was a little mouse. My mother used to throw pieces of bread to it until someone warned her that this tiny mouse would grow into a huge rat. My mother trapped the mouse, killed it and sighed in relief. She had no kindness left for rats. Wasn't it enough that one rat had interfered in her fate when she was 11 years old, precipitated her engagement and forced her to be married at 14?

This is how it happened. A rabid rat hiding in a pile of wood next to the boiler bit my mother's much older sister, Manifa, who came down with a sudden fever and died, leaving three small boys, the youngest a baby.

That was in Beirut in 1934. Two years earlier, my grandmother had brought the little girl who would become my mother to live in the city where my grandmother's four adult children lived and worked. Those half brothers and sisters of my mother's were from my grandmother's first marriage, which had come to an abrupt end when her husband was killed in a robbery. My grandmother married again, but her second husband, my grandfather, left her. Reduced to eating chard and discarded grain in the wheat fields of south Lebanon, my grandmother and mother joined 19 other family members living in one large Beirut apartment.

When the rat killed Manifa, the family decreed that my mother should marry her widowed brother-in-law as soon as she got her first period. She could then become a mother to her three bereaved nephews. My mother's brother-in-law and soon-to-be husband was 18 years her senior: she was a tiny fish caught in a net.

Her marriage not only plucked her from the clamour of Beirut it also tore her from her first love. She had met Muhammad when she was 13 and he was 18. She was taking sewing classes with a seamstress, his cousin. He heard her singing and fell in love.

Their love was innocent and platonic. When he discovered she couldn't read or write, he read her poems and prose. She, in turn, thought up her own poems and recited them to him.

Muhammad's love was not only romantic, it was also caring. He thought she would prefer to carry a handbag, rather than a drawstring money pouch around her neck. With the utmost delicacy he suggested she should buy a bra. He gave her a toothbrush and toothpaste after he saw her brushing her teeth with salt and water.

My mother tried everything she could not to marry. "I am too young!" she yelled. A beautiful, spirited girl, she begged relatives to come to the rescue. Then she set her brother-in-law a series of conditions for marriage, never believing he would agree. She asked for roast chicken from a restaurant, then a trip to the cinema to see Laurel and Hardy. Appalled at her naivety, her sewing teacher advised a gold watch and bracelets instead. When these were also forthcoming, my mother ran back to her village in the south, to her absent father. But her fate

was sealed. Her father had already agreed to the marriage for a price of 10 gold coins. He beat her and took her back to Beirut, to the hands that forced her into a traditional white wedding dress. Howling, my mother ran to the stove and blackened her face with soot, a symbol of mourning, two nights in a row. On the third night, she was pushed into her brother-in-law's room.

Now married, my 14-year-old mother continued playing with children her own age. They played hide and seek on Beirut rooftops and she became a movie addict, dreaming of escape. My mother's husband was a pious workaholic, living to work and pray. She didn't dare think about Muhammad, who had sent her a bitter message when he heard about the marriage, blaming himself for trusting such a young girl. But at the age of 15, when my mother gave birth to my older sister, it was Muhammad who sent flowers.

My mother began meeting Muhammad in daylight, hiding in his bedroom at his family home. She would spend hours there, waiting for him to come back from work at lunchtime, forced to pee into a bottle. When they made love for the first time, my mother wept because she had let someone other than Muhammad lie on top of her and rob her of her virginity. And Muhammad wept because he was a decent man in love with a married woman. She then went home and seduced my father, believing that the baby would be half Muhammad's and half my father's. When she told Muhammad she was pregnant, he accused her of betrayal. She, indignant, explained the half-baby plan and he explained that he had been careful not to get her pregnant. My mother had believed that each time they had sex it made a baby and didn't understand. Muhammad was the first person to explain the facts of life to my mother, who was now expecting me.

After my birth, the situation became more complicated still. Muhammad's brother spilled the beans. My mother denied everything, but her suspicious, gloomy older half-brother took to watching her like a hawk, and decreed that she wasn't to go out unless chaperoned by his wife. In spite of the scandal and threats, my mother was determined to stay in the relationship with Muhammad.

Muhammad pressured my mother to get a divorce. Her answer was always: "Do you want me to throw myself under this speeding car?" She was lying low, like a clipped dove.

She became pregnant again to allay suspicion and demonstrate her love for my father, before drinking boiled parsley and jumping from her bed to the floor until she miscarried. Her failed pregnancy worked, buying her more time. But one day she heard a shopkeeper saying loudly as she went by, "There are three things that one cannot hide: love, a pregnancy and riding a camel." Realising that my mother was too frightened to ask for a divorce, Muhammad went to one of my mother's four half-siblings, a laidback lute player, and asked him to tell the family.

I was seven years old and playing outside the apartment when my mother left. She hurried away carrying a suitcase, with her father. I had no idea that this was the last moment of the life I had known. A few days later, my older sister and I were taken to see her in the south. Muhammad soon followed. He pointed a pistol at my grandfather when he suggested they wait three months before getting married, as the sharia law decrees. When a fruit fly flew up his nose a few moments later, I thought it was fine revenge for stealing my mother.

I was returned to the devout father who prayed and taught me to graft fragments of soap on to new bars, who mended my shoes with scrap pieces of leather and cursed my mother. He loved and cared for us, but his real devotion was to religion and frugality.

Soon my mother was back in Beirut, now married to Muhammad and wearing a bright blue dress. Fatima and I hurried to visit her in secret and I froze as I stepped over the threshold of Muhammad's room and saw the missing Persian carpet that my father had accused the blind cane-mender of stealing. My mother had betrayed me. I had loved the cane-mender, who was like a magician, weaving chairs with eyes like two clouds in the sky.

I put my mother away in a box. When I occasionally visited her, she was like a funny, chaotic neighbour. Once I played *La Poupée qui Fait Non* on a portable record player so many times she began to wail. And she wailed, too, when Muhammad's car skidded and crashed in a mountain valley, leaving her a widow at the age of 35 with five more children.

My mother's marriage to Muhammad had been a victory. She had overcome scandal to become the respectable wife of a husband in a prestigious government position. But now Muhammad's death left my mother unprotected. Custom decreed that she needed a male guardian. But her guardian, Muhammad's brother, also fell in love with her, and my mother had to battle with the courts to release her from a guardian who had become her stalker. Yet even when she was often poor and lonely, her humour never left her. I remember the time when looking in her purse and not finding change to give a taxi driver, she fished out a photo of her father, saying, "Take this instead, my father comes from one of the best families in the south. He's a sheikh."

She would hide from her creditors behind the sitting-room curtains, only the smoke from her cigarettes giving her away. "Hush, hush," she told an angry creditor, "I'd never have hidden if I had even half a piaster to give you." She needed people around her, her flat turning into a widows' club.

I grew up, meanwhile, became a journalist and novelist, got married, had children and left for London when civil war broke out in Lebanon. My mother also left Beirut along with Muhammad's five children, living in Kuwait and the US. I saw even less of her. After the war ended, my mother came home to Beirut while we stayed away, part of a worldwide diaspora.

It was my mother who charmed me back, alluring me with her wit and vivacity. She told me about the time in the US when she heard that her father had died in south Lebanon. She knocked on her neighbour's door and asked him to cry with her. "Aren't we all," she said to the astonished American in explanation, "children of Adam and Eve?"

She asked me repeatedly if I loved her. She also asked if I would write her life story. I resisted, pointing out that she had inspired my writing. "I don't want to inspire," she said. "I want you to listen to me!"

It was when I finally agreed to listen that I released my mother from the box I had put her in all those years earlier. But uneasiness kept me standing on her doorstep when I arrived, tearful, after a fight with my father. She welcomed me in but I didn't know how to be part of her new family. My new baby half-sister, in pink pyjamas, crawled towards me to touch my feet. I left.

Those images vanish when my mother begins the story of her life. She describes the day of the white wedding dress. How she wailed, how she blackened her face with soot from the stove. My little mother was grieving for herself when she was pushed into my father's room. That room is still vivid in my memory: pinkish walls, floor tiles, and its art deco bed: a place of beginnings, but not endings.

. *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story* by Hanan al-Shaykh is published by Bloomsbury, £14.99. To order a copy for £13.99 with free UK p&p, go to theguardian.com/bookshop or call 0330 333 6846

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