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THAT'S NOT WHAT THE
BOOKS SAY!

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Chapter 1

Life in the United Arab Emirates

Learning to walk or to talk, graduating from school or university—these are some of the achievements we all strive for. As we get older, most of us marry and have children. Each of these events is like a trophy on the wall of life and can feel like a real accomplishment. But even though these milestones are really important and feel unique to us, these experiences are universal. Across the world and across cultures, people reach these pinnacles and achieve these ambitions. It is humbling to step back sometimes and recognize how these important personal events connect us to all people across the globe.

But that doesn't mean our experiences are all the same. All those parenting books I read aimed at Western women helped me see that celebrating these milestones and our experiences of them is universal but also unique to each culture, and we should embrace that. This lighthearted look at being a woman and becoming a mom in the UAE is based on my experiences and observations of life as I crossed the threshold into parenthood. I hope you enjoy this glimpse into my life and, if you are a UAE mom too, I hope it brings you relief as you learn you are completely normal and you are most definitely not alone!

In case you are not an Emirati and you are curious about the region, I would first like to fill you in on what Emirati life is like; how families do things here in the United Arab Emirates, especially my family. Feel free to skip ahead to the parenting sections if this bit is not for you. Otherwise, enjoy a peek into my culture and my country.

The UAE

“A nation without a past is a nation without a present or a future. Thanks to God, our nation has a flourishing civilization, deep-rooted in this land for many centuries. These roots will always flourish and bloom in the glorious present of our nation and in its anticipated future.” –The late Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the United Arab Emirates.

The United Arab Emirates is a young country. It was only founded in 1971. The new nation brought together six Emirates, with a seventh joining a year later. (Emirates are similar to kingdoms, but headed by a sheikh. We can think of sheikhs as princes.) The most famous Emirates are Dubai and Abu Dhabi. When I first moved to Abu Dhabi and then started to travel on holidays, people did not know what Abu Dhabi was when I told them where I was from. This was around 2013 and 2014. Therefore, to save myself the long conversations, I started saying that I was from Dubai. What shocked me is that in more recent years, when I tell people abroad that I am from Dubai, they tell me that they have only been to Abu Dhabi! I have also come across many people who think that Dubai is the country and Abu Dhabi is its capital. Besides Dubai and Abu Dhabi, there are also Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah, and Ras al Khaimah.

The oil industry boom in the 1950s and 1960s created a lot of wealth in the Middle East. It completely underpins the extraordinary growth of Dubai and other major cities in the country, but these days we are starting to look beyond oil. Young Emiratis growing up as the cities grew have never known any other way of life. However, our grandparents and

even our parents remember how the country used to be. While there were always some cities and towns on the coast, large numbers of UAE families were nomadic. There is still a romance for the old desert traditions, especially among the men in the families who sometimes drive out into the desert to camp and have fun.

Cultural Evolution

“Future generations will be living in a world that is very different from that to which we are accustomed. It is essential that we prepare ourselves and our children for that new world.” –The late Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the United Arab Emirates.

As a child, I believe most of us only think of the next step. We never think of five or ten years in the future until we get to that first job interview and get asked “where do you see yourself in five years?” When I was in grade three, I was excited to go to grade four. I did not have far-flung hopes of university or even high school. However, as adults, we make plans for our children’s futures. We dream about who they might become and what they will do, and gradually our children learn what we dream for them. I grew up knowing that my parents always wished for me to earn a college degree. Then I would get a good job. This has been the guiding path I have followed through my life.

In the past, before the Emirates discovered oil, parents’ goals for their kids were the same as they had been for generations, ever since our people first lived in this region. Moms and dads simply wanted their children to have a family and to prosper. For my culture, traditionally, having a family offers a sense of security and this is very important. Since the time of my ancestors, when the young people were ready, they got married and lived a good life raising their children. Now, however, society is changing. For my generation, for me and my sisters, living in the new skyscraping cities built on the oil wealth of our young nation, our parents’ first goal for all of us was to get educated. I always knew that if marriage came, my

family would be happy, it would be fine, but the big difference from the past is that if marriage did not come, that would also be okay. It is not the main thing for us anymore, and that is true for both boys and girls.

This interest that came from what I would assume the 1980s onwards in higher education for both men and women has been a real cultural shift from the past for Emirati families, but it's been very positive and very gradual. What I love is that our roots in the values that make Emirati families strong are still as solid as ever, and our lifestyles continue to revolve around family gatherings and events. But we live in a world that appears on the surface to be incredibly modern; it embraces new technology and is full of ambition. As a nation, we are using our oil wealth, our innovative plans, and many other achievements that are not centered around oil anymore to be very outward and forward-looking. We live and work digitally, we welcome visitors from across the world to work among us, and all of this gives us a global view and a thirst for travel.

I am Emirati through and through: I was born in Dubai in 1990, raised in Sharjah, and now reside in Abu Dhabi with my husband Saeed and three children, Shereena, Mahra, and Alia. However, like so many young Emiratis, I was educated in American institutes. I grew up speaking both English and Arabic. What has contributed a lot to my English was that my brother married an American who moved in my family's house in 1999—my American sister who lived with us for a period of time. I grew up watching Disney classics in English, and series like “Sabrina the Teenage Witch” and “Clueless.” I still watch English and American movies and TV shows on daily basis, and my all-time favorite show is “Friends.” I would reference each and every situation that happens in my life to a joke said on the show or a situation that happened to the characters of the show. My peers and I have grown up in a time and place that sits right in the middle of two wealthy cultures, and that gives us a unique perspective on them both. I enjoy much about Western media and culture, but I respect our Emirati traditions as well, and I apply them both with

logic. This is a typical modern way of life for young people here in UAE, and it is one reason why I see our nation as a real crossroads of the world.

The Entrepreneurial Spirit

In my experience, Emirati women have always had an entrepreneurial spirit. However, that spirit has not always been something that could be encouraged or accommodated because of the importance of bearing many children. Women in the past used to work on what is now referred to as “traditional crafts.” They used to make *khous*, which are handwoven palm leaves traditionally used for roofing and floor mats, or *telli*, the most cherished form of embroidery in the UAE, or *sadu*, which is handwoven wool traditionally used in making Bedouin tents and carpets. Henna art, sewing, and pottery were also part of a traditional craft repertoire. Looking back at my mother’s and grandmother’s generations, women in our family married young, the minute they were ready to have children. They were proud to have many children for the family and raised them with very little help. Their lives were full of love but also full of hard work like house chores, sometimes cooking feasts for the entire neighborhood, as such generosity is embedded within the culture. Often, women managed all this and created businesses too. My mother is a fantastic example of an entrepreneurial Emirati woman. She built up a clothes-making business and has been an inspiration for me as I explore my options as a woman, a mother, and a budding entrepreneur as well.

Learning from My Mom

I grew up in Sharjah, and when I was a little girl, I was surrounded by the most fantastic fashion. Design and fashion grew to be a passion of mine, and I am sure this is all because of my mother. Besides having eight children, my talented mother created her own fashion empire—or at least to my 6-year-old self it was an empire. Back when I was small, we did not have all the malls and international fashion stores that the UAE is famous for today. Instead, many clothes were handmade and designed locally. My mother saw there was a market for beautiful dresses, skirts, and with exquisitely detailed embroidery, so she set up her own designer tailor shop. Clients would come in and she would create pieces especially for them: bespoke, made-to-measure. She had a large team of seamstresses and tailors to custom-make her designs, and the clients loved her work. They told other people about her, and hers became one of the most successful tailoring shops in Sharjah between 1996 and 2000.

I used to go to Mom's shop from the age of six to watch her work. It was magical being there surrounded by this creative team and all the rolls of colorful fabric, seeing the machines at work and the skills of the craftspeople as they sewed the fine detail. But behind it all was the talent of my mother. Her friends love to remind me of the times when they visited the shop when I was little and I pretended to be the designer, sketching out designs for them and wasting a ton of my mother's paper! I am sure this is where my own love for design and fashion comes from. When I went to high school, a dream grew inside me that after getting a sensible degree in business or some other "substantial" subject, I would pursue

a degree in fashion as well. Then I would follow my mother's footsteps.

Nevertheless, my mother's fashion dream did not last long. She became a victim of her own success and the jealousy of others. Local designers saw what was happening and were envious of her growing client list. People started bribing her tailors and taking them away to open their own businesses. Running the shop became so much harder than simply designing beautiful clothes for people. In the end, it became too stressful and, when I was ten, she sold the business.

I still love fashion and I have inherited my mother's entrepreneurial spirit. At university, I got my first chance to test this out. In 2008, I set up a successful fashion blog called *Fashion Hermit*. It was all about having a different style from everyone else. I wrote about the recent trends, and people started to follow my blog. Back then, setting up a blog was somewhat new; only a few Emirati girls were doing it. The idea of being a fashion designer was too far out there. People did not see it as a real career option. But that blog gave me an amazing opportunity when I was offered the chance to work as a fashion editor for an online Dubai magazine called *Style in Dubai*.

I would go to the shops, have photoshoots, and get invited to exclusive events. I met designers such as Tom Ford, Michael La Coste, and Antonio Marras. It was such a fun time and really exciting for me. But when I got engaged and was almost done with university, it felt like it was the right time to end that chapter. It's important to do what suits your life and let things go when they don't work for you anymore.

I no longer see myself working in fashion, but I still take pride in my appearance and I enjoy fashion on a personal level. I love dressing myself, I love helping my sisters and friends make the right fashion choices when they ask me for help. What is interesting, though, is that now a lot of local designers have emerged, achieving successes on an international scale, especially since 2013. We are seeing an exciting boom in local talent and creativity, which is excellent for the country. There are hundreds of Emirati labels to

choose from now. But I love how my mother was a trailblazer and, through my blog, in a way so was I. I recently met someone who had also gone to school in Sharjah, and we were surprised to find out that we were neighbors who had never met. She went home and spoke about me to her sister who responded by saying, “Mouza Al Kaabi? From Sharjah? Got married and moved to Abu Dhabi? She was the first Emirati blogger!” I modestly admitted that was me, but surely I was not the first Emirati blogger.

So I had this hope of working in fashion and, for as long as I can remember, I wanted to visit Paris, the fashion capital of the world. I finally took a trip there at the age of twenty (2010), and it was everything I had hoped it would be. I really loved the city. Moreover, I remember walking with my sister’s friend and telling her, “Mark my words, someday I’m going to live here and I’m going to set up my own label.” It seemed so clear to me. But everyone’s interests change over time. Especially when you are a university or a high school student, you have different interests than when you graduate and go into the workforce and see what the real world is like.

Now, I have my marketing job at a media-specialized company, a sector I strongly believe in. My current job is my second job since graduating university in 2013. At the end of 2016, I started setting up a small business selling children’s clothing and toys handmade by mothers from different parts of the world. The mission of my business, Tony & Natty, is to support mothers with sewing skills in order for them to be able to support their own families. The store was launched in 2017, which was marked as “The Year of Giving” in the United Arab Emirates, and I love how my concept fit the theme of the year.

I have noticed that Emirati women seem to be different from women in many Western societies because we are juggling so many things. For my mom, it was tailoring besides raising her children. For myself and besides being a mother, I work 9 to 5 in marketing, I am writing this book, and I have my small retail business. I see opportunities all the time, and many of the women I know have a similar lifestyle. They

work in an office as well as having a family, and lots of them have a little business of some kind. This seems to be a real strength of Emirati women that not every culture has.

The Emirati Family

The United Arab Emirates is at a crossroads in time and history, and you can really see that in how young couples are living these days. Our people come from a proud tradition of families who travelled the region and lived at peace with the desert landscape. In the mid-twentieth century, our nation was blessed to discover great natural riches under our desert. The skyscraping cities of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and other Emirates have raced upwards on the wealth those discoveries created, and our families live in ways our forefathers of only a few generations ago could never have dreamed. However, despite all the changes on the surface, our traditional culture and family ways shine through, for which we are blessed.

If you are Emirati, I will bet you met your husband in the same way I met mine. Saeed and I were childhood sweethearts. The tradition here in the UAE and in the Gulf countries in general is that the parents chat together and when their friends have children, they always say, “Oh, this girl is my son’s future wife” or “This is my daughter’s future husband.” Maybe people in other countries do something similar when their children are small. If you’re a “Friends” fan, remember that episode right after Rachel gives birth to Emma when Janice walks in the hospital room with her newborn son saying, “Say hello to Aaron, your future son-in-law!”? Our situation is almost the same. It is a compliment to your friend’s child saying you think they are good enough for your child to marry. And it’s super cute to look at your babies and imagine their future like that, especially when they’re toddling along hand-in-hand. Even in my generation, we still do it. When my friend had a son recently, I found myself saying, “Oh, that’s my future son-in-law.”

In Western countries, it seems that the tradition stops there when the boys and girls are babies. But here in the UAE, quite often those visions we dream of when our children are small turn out to be true, and those cute toddlers do grow up to marry each other. And before anybody starts to get concerned, no one is coerced. It is not like that. There is no pressure and it is not a rule. I have people in my family who were supposed to marry a particular person the parents wished them to marry, but it did not happen that way in the end. It is a real choice for our young people. What Western people often do not realize, though, is that in reality the parents' suggestion often works out well. We spend so much time socializing with our families, if we are able to find someone suitable from friends' families, it means we spend more time with the people we like and love. It brings people together in a lovely way.

For Saeed and I, this tradition worked out beautifully. We were childhood friends. When we were small, we used to play together, and our families used to hang out a lot with each other. Sadly, as can happen, our families grew apart for a while, so I did not see Saeed from the age of six to around sixteen or seventeen. Then I saw him again. It was just a brief "Hi, how are you? How are you doing?" and so on, but I could not stop thinking about him! Little did I know that I was on his mind, too. We were thinking about each other the whole time from that point, but our lives went in separate ways again, and we didn't speak for another five years.

Eventually, it happened that we reconnected during my last year of university, in 2011. This is quite a popular time for women to think about getting married, just as they finish their education. So, here is a fairytale for the digital age, as Rachel would say: Saeed approached me on Twitter. We realized how much we liked each other, so we decided to get married. The modern Emirati way.

Getting Married

One way our marriage culture has changed across the generations is that after the wedding we now go away on honeymoon, while in my mother's generation that barely ever happened. Saeed and I went off and enjoyed a very tranquil honeymoon in the Maldives. But when we returned from our travels, we started our married life in the traditional Emirati way, not in a home of our own, as we would do if we were English or American perhaps; instead, we came back from our travels and moved into Saeed's family's house in Abu Dhabi.

Living all together like this with the husband's family is the Emirati way. It is important for us to live together with our family members across all the generations. This is quite unlike the Western countries, where the new couple goes off and sets up a home on their own. For us, the wife moves in with her husband's family, and often this will mean living with his parents, grandparents, brothers, and unmarried sisters. Our houses usually have separate apartments inside them, so they do not feel crowded.

For me, I felt very blessed to move into Saeed's family house, as Saeed's younger sister is a talented interior designer. When we returned from our travels, we found she had lovingly prepared an apartment for us. To begin with, we shared our home with his mother, grandmother, sister, and younger brother, but his father mostly stayed in another home of theirs in Al Ain, a city in Abu Dhabi that is almost two hours away from downtown Island, due to his work. It is a sociable setup, but within the family home everyone has his or her own space. It is a lovely way to live. On the day we arrived back from our honeymoon, it was a joy to walk in and

see our rooms beautifully decorated and furnished and to feel so welcomed.

Married Life, UAE-Style

When I first moved to Abu Dhabi, I did not work for six months. I had so much to get used to in this new city and I was a new wife. I developed a lovely routine at first. My husband would go to work and I would go to the gym, then pop to the salon before going grocery shopping. Sometimes, I would skip the grocery store and stay at the salon for hours, getting the most complicated nail art done! I would then head home, cook something light or order takeout for lunch, and that would be my day until he came in from work.

After six months, though, I found a job. It turned out, it was boring not working, and I felt it the most when I was on maternity leave in 2014, 8 months after getting my first job and 14 months after getting married. I was ready to go back to the office! I started working as a marketer at a government entity that does quality infrastructure for Abu Dhabi. They do all the testing to ensure that all the products and services are according to the international standards. It was a good place to start my career. In early 2018, I moved to a different sector, which is media, but still as a marketer. This type of career away from home is very different from my mom's experience and definitely a big change from what my grandmother's lifestyle was like. They were married so much younger than me and started having children much younger as well. The opportunity was not there to get a degree in the way it is now, and they didn't have the options we have. However, the founding father of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, has changed the mindset of the society and given women the right to work and be productive outside of the house. In one of his speeches he said, "The woman is half of the society; any country which pursues development

should not leave her in poverty or illiteracy.” The United Arab Emirates was the first Arab country to introduce a mandatory female presence in boardrooms.