

Karachi, Dacca... and Back

Searching to Reclaim My Children



Isabel Camacho Diamond



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To son Frank, to Teresa and
Grandson Jonathan and his son GG.

Also to Kimberly and Grandsons:

Mark

Chad

Kirk

Brett

Scott, and the
Grandfather they never knew.

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Author's Note

With the objective of enlightening my family about my formative years I have written sporadically of my childhood in Costa Rica, of my youth after moving to New York City, and of rearing my children. Describing to an editor friend my interest in assembling these notes into a printed form, she suggested I concentrate on a period limited to what I could prepare for editing within six months. Impressed with my husband's fascination with my occasional narratives about the Middle East, I selected that period. That was three years ago.

While transcribing episodes I had previously only recited verbally, the chance discovery of two passports covering the period, verified the chronological order of my travels and encouraged me to flesh out details and probe deeper into my memory. The personal exchanges in this book are related as accurately as I can recall, regardless of how painful that recollection has been. The chance encounters you read about—not so rare in my life—really

did happen, and names were made up only when I could not recall the actual names. I do not intend to dishonor anyone and I apologize if my version of events makes some, especially my loved ones, uncomfortable.

Friends have read or attentively listened to portions of this manuscript and encouraged me to carry it to completion, and I thank you all. My special thanks to an early editor, Barbara Stahura, and to writers Terry Breckenridge, Robert Lundy, Joseph Crews, Tim O’Leary and Ruth Haferkamp for their helpful notes, and for their wholehearted praise that I found joyously rewarding. I thank my husband for endless hours of editing, along with the moderation he exercised during our inevitable writer-editor deliberations, and most of all, for his constant dedication to the task. This is my story and we have tried to maintain phrases as I spoke them, and to not edit out the influence of my native Spanish.

KARACHI, DACCA...AND BACK
SEARCHING TO RECLAIM MY CHILDREN

Chapter One

To Iran With My Children

Uisions of flying carpets from childhood books in Costa Rica augmented by Hollywood versions of mysterious, romantic sheiks on white horses racing over sand dunes formed my impression of ancient Persia. At age twenty-three I was on my way to Persia, now called Iran, with my two children, Frankie, age three and Teresa, age one. My husband, Frank, an airline pilot, relocated to a new job there two months ago, and had sent for us; certainly that meant he was committed to change for the better. It was not, however, my positive outlook toward this change, or those childhood images, that induced me to make this trip. I had simply resolved to follow my husband to Iran because that was my only remaining option. I was totally unprepared for the situation I was now entering.

I gathered everything I thought the three of us would need for our long journey from New York, across the

world, including a new invention called disposable diapers for Teresa. In 1957, these diapers were far too expensive to use every day, but having them along now would make our arduous trip much easier. Soon we were ready and Dad picked us up at Mrs. Vieto's house on 182nd Street, where my children and I had been living the last three months, and drove us to the international airport, then called Idlewild.

Watching the scenery along the road to the airport I thought about why Dad and I never talked much about anything. How can you know someone for such a long time and not really know who that person is? Yet, it seems there has always been that distance between us. He left me with his mother when I was young and left Costa Rica in search of work that would earn a better living. He returned after some time in Panama and migrated to the U.S. I was nine years old at that time and did not see him again until I arrived in New York at age fourteen. By then I felt all grown up, but our relationship had not progressed from those years living with Grandmother in Costa Rica, receiving only occasional letters. While he was away I used to reminisce about how much my *papito* loved me. Since my earliest memory of our life together, my love and respect for that often distant father had developed into a perception of a person greater than the reality of the dad of today: a childhood relationship whose closeness did not endure. Now he is seeing me off to another foreign country and he has not asked any

questions. “Dad, I am scared,” the child in me would say to him. “I wish you could come with us.”

In my mind today, however, I need my dad’s support. “Frank wants us all to be together again—that is a good sign, isn’t it, Dad?” In truth, I didn’t know. Deep down, Frank was a good man. I had seen him stop drinking on his own and I believed that with my help he would realize the excessive drinking was the root of our problems and that if he could control his drinking habit, our lives would really be OK.

I was about to place a great physical distance between my father and me, and I wondered, “How I am going to handle all of these things by myself? Dad, you are with me now and you could help us. I love you so very much and I am sad about leaving you.”

Optimism seems to have been my companion. I believed I could change Frank. I knew that the frantic measures of our lives in recent months had to end and I thought that this move would be the way out of a trying situation for me, for my children, and, hopefully, also for Frank.

A few months after the birth of Teresa in Mont-Joli, Quebec, Frank lost his job piloting DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line radar installation supply planes. Having recently survived winter in that remote town we needed a less isolated address while he looked for another position, so we packed our goods and headed to his hometown of Hastings, Pennsylvania. I was silently devastated. To me, going back to Hastings was a death sentence. We

had stayed there during a previous spell between airline jobs and I absolutely hated that coal-mining town. I was still recovering from this second unplanned child and I was desperate to have someone close by that I could communicate with. I knew of no such person in that town of narrow-minded people intolerant to outsiders. Nevertheless, I kept outwardly calm and during the trip I did not say anything for a long time. Then I started to think it might be better if I died. But how might that happen? I could just open the car door. I was sitting in the back seat because there was more room for me to breastfeed baby Teresa and to tend to Frankie. I imagined myself opening the door and taking both children with me—I was certainly not going without them.

I finally told Frank how strongly I felt about going to Hastings. “The people there make it more isolated than Mont-Jolí,” I implored. “I really do not want to go back to live in your mother’s house. We tried that before and there was no room—and that was before this additional child.” I don’t recall including a description of those dreaded nighttime trips to the outhouse bathroom, but soon after driving across the New York State line into Pennsylvania, Frank indicated his agreement by stopping at a motel in a medium-sized town, in a wooded and hilly area. We stayed another two days, and then he told me, “I have a surprise for you, come get in the car.” I got the kids and off we went. He turned into a trailer park and stopped in front of a new brown and white house trailer.

“Come Frankie,” he called and our boy ran over to hold his hand. Frank handed him some keys and told Frankie to open his new house. Frankie’s face lit up big time. I was open-mouthed. I could not believe my eyes: buying a new trailer and taking it to a pleasant trailer park. This was the best thing that had ever happened between the two of us. “If you don’t close your mouth flies are going to get in,” said Frank. I was happy and joyous to move in and enjoy the two bedrooms and the pristine appearance, finer than any of our previous rented apartments.

While traveling, Teresa, or Cita, as I usually called her (derived from Terecita, using the Spanish diminutive form “-ita” for a young person’s name) had contracted a cold. No sooner had we settled into the trailer when the cold developed into pneumonia and we had to take her to the local hospital. In her weakened condition it was two weeks before we could bring her home and, although her recovery continued slowly, we were very contented to have her back. I loved to hold her and feel her tiny body close to mine. I knew she felt secure while in my arms. I also loved taking care of my little boy, Frankie. He was so good, causing no problems, and was also happy with the new place. He and I both readily made friends with our neighbors in the small community of the park. I also liked looking after my husband and maintaining a tidy home, washing clothes and preparing food for the four of us. I was at ease being fully occupied. After lunch we would all take a nap. Since Frank was not working, he

would also lie in bed with us and for the most part read some books. I never asked him what the stories were about and he never offered a description.

This lifestyle continued on for a few months when I found out that I was pregnant again. Into my second day of wrestling with how to handle this most unwelcome information, Frank went out to the Post Office early in the morning. He was expecting a response from a job application he had recently filed. He did not return until lunchtime, when he entered abruptly. Instantly I became alarmed. He was clearly in one of his ugly moods and I did not have to be told that he didn't get the job. Little Frankie was eating lunch at the table and I was seated in a small rocking chair breastfeeding Teresa. "What happened?" I asked. There was no answer. He rarely shared anything concerning his work.

Observing that he was intoxicated, I asked if he was hungry and offered to fix some eggs. This only seemed to anger him, and he opened the refrigerator, reached for the eggs muttering, "This is what I do with eggs," and thrust them to the floor, stepped on them, and proceeded to rub them into my freshly scrubbed, new floors with his shoes. Still not consoled, he shook the bottle of beer in his hand and, sputtering obscenities, sprayed the walls with its contents. Little Frankie began to cry and I clutched his hand in mine and cradled the baby in the other, while I scurried outside asking Frankie, "Do you want to ride your new tricycle?" He was still crying, but willingly got

on. I had salvaged the tricycle from where it was set out for trash pick-up, replaced the chain, bought new pedals and handle grips, and painted it red. The previous owner upon recognizing it had complimented me. I have always been creative; I just did not credit myself with notable talent.

While calming Frankie I resolved that I would leave. I most certainly would not tell Frank of my condition. I was desperate. I could not have this baby in this town alone with this man. I needed someone to talk to but whom? I didn't know anyone here. Mrs. Vieto came to mind. When I first came to the United States from Costa Rica I lived with my father in his third-floor apartment in her house in New York City. She was Costa Rican, always spoke in Spanish, and I visited with her almost daily after school, or work, or whatever activity I was up to that day. It was Mrs. Vieto's home I returned to after working outside of New York, and I was living there when I first met Frank.

Now that Frankie was contentedly playing with his tricycle where I could keep an eye on him and the baby was sleeping I glanced inside and saw that Frank had fallen asleep. I seized the opportunity to telephone dear Mrs. Vieto. I described my condition and circumstances and she was appalled at what she heard. She said, "Your distress is right, you cannot have another baby with that man. You come back and I will make room for you and the children. You know you have a place with me anytime."

Late that afternoon when Frank went out to drink again, I gathered the children's clothes and packed all that I could carry. Then I pulled the emergency money I had been appropriating from household funds and Frank's pockets from its hiding place in a purse at the bottom of my clothing drawer and called a taxi. The driver took us to a bus headed to Harrisburg, where we could catch a train. Terrified that Frank might overtake us, I clutched my children and bags ever more tightly as we entered the waiting room at the railroad station. Finally the train to New York City arrived and we clambered aboard. Despite the novelty, the children fell asleep almost at once, but I was overwhelmed with apprehension about how Frank would react when he could not find his favorite punching bag: me. I kept wondering, "Oh God, what is going to happen?" Finally, with the rhythm of the train, I too fell asleep and was awakened by the conductor as we pulled into New York's Pennsylvania Station. He kindly helped with our bags and called a porter who, with a cart, wheeled us through the commodious structure to a taxi in front.

When we arrived at Mrs. Vieto's house, she welcomed us with a smile and open arms and led us to the room she had prepared for us. This was the first time she had seen Teresa, and Frankie was only one when we were last at her house, so there were many stories to catch up on. Soon our discussion turned to my most pressing concern: the abortion and how we were going to approach it. Like

me, Mrs. Vieto was Catholic, but at this point in my life a prompt resolution of my predicament overrode those old admonitions. Mrs. Vieto never mentioned any Catholic taboo and concurred completely with my reasoning.

I thought of the one medical person I felt I could talk with in New York, Doctor Alvarez, who had assisted me with the birth of Frankie three years before at Morrisania Hospital. A Puerto Rican, he communicated freely with me and we had become fast friends while I took Frankie for post-natal checkups. I called upon him now, confided with him about my situation, and asked if he knew where or to whom I could go. After a few moments he asked, “Do you have a place where we could perform the operation?”

“Yes I do,” I replied, “at Mrs. Vieto’s house.”

“I will help you.”

What a relief! I had no doubt about his competence and no longer felt the least uncomfortable about my decision. Nevertheless, all three of us were assuming some risk because in 1957, the operation was still illegal in New York.

In the years that I had lived with Mrs. Vieto the doors were always unlocked, but the night of the procedure Mrs. Vieto locked both the front door to the street as well as the door to our room. The operation was carried out on the kitchen table. I do not recall if there was any pain and whatever bleeding that may have occurred left no negative impression. Mrs. Vieto assisted with extra lamplight, clean towels, cotton and a bag to remove the

discards. The doctor came by the next day to ensure that I was well. I thanked him, and to this day, I still honor that doctor's dedication to the needs of his patients. I also continue to bear Mrs. Vieto in mind for her devotion to me in placing my well-being above all else. Also, she personally paid for the procedure since I did not have enough money after my trip to the city to reimburse her.

Three weeks later, Frank showed up at Mrs. Vieto's door unannounced. Although I had not heard from him since we left, he seemed glad to see us. Then he broke the bad news that he had an accident with the trailer and that it was a total loss.

"How about our belongings?" I questioned.

"No, it was a total loss," he repeated.

"And insurance?"

No answer. Apparently we had no insurance for the trailer, the car, or our belongings. He said that he was upset at me for leaving him but in front of Mrs. Vieto he controlled his voice and expressed no particular anger. I believe he really was glad to see us in good health. I did not try to pursue the matter of the accident any further, such as where or how the accident happened, because I felt my provocation would have only made the situation worse.

"I have a job overseas," he announced with pride. "It's in Iran, and it will solve all our problems."

I thought, "Maybe it will solve the money problems for you but how about the emotional problems caused by your abusiveness to our family whenever you drink and

lose control?” I did not feel strong enough to raise this argument in front of Mrs. Vieto and the children, so I did not say anything. He said he had not been drinking since we left, which I believed, because I had seen him stay off liquor for several weeks at a time.

“Now that I have this job I can send for you as soon as I find a house there. It will be as soon as I can.”

I replied, “You go find a house for us.” I was afraid to say no and was not about to tell him what I had just done for myself.

“I am very sorry about what I did and I will not ever drink again.” Wow! I had heard that story so many times before.

He sent some money, and in a couple of months he called to say he had a house in Abadan, Iran, and now we could come. Meanwhile, I was also trying to make it on my own. The jobs I could find offered little pay. My most recent experience was as a dancing teacher, where I had met Frank. Now the best work I could find was as a dance hall hostess. It was a large well-lighted dance hall that specialized in ballroom dancing. Men purchased dance tickets at the entrance counter and presented one to the lady of their choice for each dance. We were paid for the number of tickets we turned in, plus a minimum salary. Mrs. Vieto took care of my children when I was out working, but one night when I returned home to our room upstairs I found my little girl had fallen from the bed and apparently cried, but no one heard her and

she fell asleep on the floor. That decided it for me: this was not working! I quit the job and accepted Frank's request to join him. He claimed he had a good house and arranged for me to pick up the airline tickets, which were now tucked into my coat pocket.

At Idlewild, the stewardess helped me with the children and our bags, including the bag with Terecita's diapers and her formula. I was so grateful; traveling alone with two small children is exhausting. We boarded the KLM DC 7, the latest model airliner, so luxurious and nothing like the DC 3 that had carried me at age 14 from Costa Rica to New Orleans along my immigration route to New York City. She led us to the first row of seats, where what looked to be a tin box was hanging on the cabin wall. It would serve as a bassinet for Terecita, so we tucked her inside and buckled Frankie into his seat. At three years old he was a good boy and only a little unsure in the unfamiliar environment. The plane rolled down the runway and I held his hand and laid my other hand over the chest of Terecita in her bassinet. As we took off, I prayed silently, "Please, God, give us a safe trip."

Even though I was intimidated by the huge plane and wondered how such a large machine with those big engines hanging on the wings could get off the ground, let alone fly across the ocean, I was finally able to rest. Getting ready for our trip had been hectic, but now we were on our way to Europe, and then to Iran, where we would be reunited with Frank.

An hour or so into the flight, the plane suddenly dropped what felt like hundreds of feet. I grabbed my little girl out of the air as she headed for the ceiling. The whole aircraft vibrated sharply and made a horrendous roar. The lights flickered on and off, as if they were terrified, too. We could see that one of the engines was on fire, but not one person in the entire cabin made a sound and I don't remember any announcements from the pilot.

I held my babies close to me knowing this was how our lives would end. The three of us were together and that was good. Totally absorbed in my feelings of togetherness with them and secure in accepting our fate, I felt no fear. Then the plane straightened out from its dive and the pilot announced we were going to backtrack and land in Boston.

Fire engines met our plane on the runway and we saw the white foam they were spraying over the windows. News photographers clamored nearby as we descended the stairs but I walked right past them into the care of people from the airline. Nothing mattered except that my children were safe. All of the passengers were taken to a fine hotel where I shared a delicious dinner with my children, followed the next morning by a continental breakfast of hot chocolate and pastries. In the morning paper, I read that the pilots had feared that the burning engine would fall off and hit the tail of our plane, so they put the aircraft into a steep dive, putting the tail out of the

way should the engine break loose while at the same time extinguishing the fire.

Under care of the airline representative we were ushered to Logan airport in a bus where we climbed aboard a smaller plane back to Idlewild, and finally boarded an SAS airliner bound for Copenhagen, where connections would be made for the flight to Iran. Strangely, I recall no fear about flying again. It was most likely because I was so preoccupied with the needs of my children during our transfers that I didn't have time to reconsider. Besides, my focus was on joining my husband. After an overnight flight we arrived safely in Denmark and were taken to a first-class hotel. We were booked on a flight to Iran the next day.

After breakfast, I took the children for a walk and we saw the statue of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" sitting on her stone in the harbor, just as I had seen so many times in books and on postcards. When I strolled down the street with my children I became aware that I was in a very strange place, one I had never anticipated visiting. It looked sterile. There were few people on the sidewalks and those that were there didn't seem to share anything with me. It was as if I were invisible; so different from the feelings of warmth and familiarity in Costa Rica. Today, when I remember this old city, I picture the vast concrete roads and buildings, but as hard as I try I cannot recall any plants or trees. In the shops and in the hotel I enjoyed listening to the language, so

soft, and thinking that the history of these people must be fascinating.

That evening at the hotel I slept beneath luxurious, soft, warm bedding comprised of feathers captured within two sheets. It was not until I visited Germany on another trip that I understood the sheets full of feathers were actually lovely comforters covered by sheets changed daily, the nicest thing I ever slept under. Earlier, the hotel staff had suggested that we leave our shoes outside the door. It was a strange custom, but I cooperated. The next morning I was pleasantly surprised to find them cleaned and polished.

We departed mid-morning, went through another transfer and more waiting, and then boarded a nighttime flight. Still vivid in my mind today is my impression that we arrived in Tehran at about the same time of day as we had departed from Copenhagen, as if time had stood still. As our plane descended on the approach to Tehran, I looked out upon the vast isolation of gray terrain with some black objects moving in bunches, like gigantic ants. Not until we were about to touch down did these shapes take human form, running around this way and that.

Chaos ruled as we disembarked. My fellow passengers, so composed on the airplane, became rude and pushed one another as a crowd of black-draped forms outside surged forward. Certainly they were human but I could not see their faces. The clothes the women wore—like a big sack—covered not only their heads, but their faces

too! My God, how could they breathe? They must have felt as though they were suffocating, it was so crowded here. Up close, I observed that the only opening was a woven insert over their eyes with none at the nose or mouth. Never had I seen such a strange sight.

But soon my mind went back to Frank. Where was he? I didn't think I would last very long with guarding the cabin bags, carrying Teresa, and holding onto curious Frankie. I was surrounded by dark-clothed figures and the sounds of a strange language occasionally interrupted by unfamiliar musical rhythms from portable radios. I felt I was being drawn into fear—that this most unruly mass of people was going to crush the three of us. But thank God, at that moment I saw Frank waving his arm and beckoning me. I was relieved. He hugged and kissed us all, picked up Frankie in one arm, tucked one bag under his other arm, and with another bag in his hand, quickly moved us along. Fortunately there were few travelers in the non-citizen immigration line, and we were soon out of there.

Our final destination was Abadan and we had to board another airplane immediately. This time I did not feel encumbered with responsibility because Frank was there to help. What's more, it was quite exciting because my husband would fly us as the only passengers on a cargo plane. Little Frankie was happy and so excited, running all over the airplane. When we got ready to fly I used my "mother know-how" and bribed him to sit calmly by

feeding him and by letting him sit next to the window. I could see the smile in Frank's eyes as he climbed behind the controls with a grin, feeling totally content in his element. He had a passion for his son and was delighted to see us all. I was so proud of Frank, and of myself, too. It looked like we were going to make it this time.

Sitting on that plane piloted by my husband, I remembered our first meeting. It was May 1953, at the dance studio on Columbus Circle at Central Park, where Lincoln Center is now. I was a dance instructor and he was taking lessons from another instructor, Elsa. I had noticed that he, Frank Baleskie, was always finding a way to make people laugh. One day he invited me for a walk after work in Central Park, across the street. He said that what first attracted him about me was that while I was waiting for the next student to arrive I would devote that time to something creative, embroidering. I was making a tablecloth for my friend Elsa's wedding. I liked his sense of humor and asked how he learned so many funny stories. He replied that he was an airline pilot. So, I thought then, he certainly must be responsible. I was unconcerned that he was much older than I, probably because I had no expectations about any relationship. Later, I found the age difference was about 12 years.

Two weeks passed when he returned from flights to Denver and Las Vegas almost unrecognizable in a cowboy hat and shirt, bolo tie, boots, and the mannerisms I knew only in movies. In addition, he sported a large number

of silver dollars that he shuffled like a movie gambler. This theatrical display I highly enjoyed and I agreed to an actual date.

I was a Costa Rican girl, who had taken care of younger cousins and helped with the household from a young age, so I matured early and felt quite grown up. In those days in Costa Rica, to be a good wife and mother was the entire career to which a young girl aspired. However, even though I had been in the U.S. for five years, and worked in both New York and Florida, I had been sheltered by Mrs. Vieto, somewhat in the footsteps of my Costa Rican grandmother, by my father, and by the Latin sense of respect and honor under which I had been brought up. Additionally, I had not really dated outside of my community. For example, when I went dancing socially, it was with Costa Rican friends of Mrs. Vieto. I knew of excessive drinking as a defect of some men, but in my culture women did not do that. I had never experienced an alcohol high.

On our date Frank took me to a good restaurant and started by offering me a drink. I refused by saying that I could not stand that nasty taste of liquor. He said he knew something I would like and ordered a whisky sour. It came in a lovely sophisticated-looking glass and tasted very good. After several on an empty stomach I lost sense of what was going on. The next morning I was shocked and scared when I awoke in a strange place. What's worse, I was with the man that I went out on a

date with the night before. I moved softly and quietly not to awaken him, got myself dressed, and left the room. Realizing the danger that I had put myself in, and fearfully speculating on what might have happened in that bed, I was so embarrassed that I never wanted to see or be seen by that man again.

Three weeks later, my fear was intensified by the absence of my period and after a visit to a doctor I was forced to acknowledge what had happened. I never imagined being in a situation like this: pregnant from a man I barely knew. I started by telling Silvia, my friend and boss at the dance studio. She explained that I must face up and tell Mr. Baleskie. "I tried that already. I called the hotel and they said he had checked out. I don't know where he is."

"There must be a way."

"Look Silvia, I love my job. I want to be a dancer and a singer and this is the place that I thought would give me the opportunity to further that dream."

"You can still do that. I know other teachers who have children."

That was beyond the dilemma of the moment and I continued, "I dare not tell Mrs. Vieto, she would be shocked and send me to the corner of the room to sit with a dunce hat." That brought a laugh from Silvia as she turned to pick up the ringing telephone. It was my dad calling me to say that his brother Arturo was in town and would like to see me.

I was relieved and happy. I had not seen Arturo since the summer after I first arrived in the U.S. I spent an enjoyable two months at his house in Philadelphia where I felt like one of his own children. His wife Katherine, my American aunt, took me out and bought me clothes and brown and white saddle shoes. In no time she had me looking like an American teenager and although conversation was difficult, for that short time I felt like one.

At my dad's apartment I ended up in the kitchen alone with my uncle Arturo. I told him what had happened and that I was afraid to tell my dad. Uncle Arturo said he would tell my dad and with that I gave him a good-bye embrace and left because I had to go to work the next morning. I never saw my uncle Arturo again.

At the dance studio a day later, I received a call from Frank. He said he had just returned from a series of flights in the West. I told him that I was pregnant. He boldly replied, "Who is the father?"

I snapped back, "You are."

"Not me," now defensive. "You must have gotten pregnant by someone else."

"I have never had sex with anyone else."

"Well, it is not mine. I only went to bed with you once. How can that be?"

I felt wounded and maligned. How could he say that? I do not even remember going to his hotel and much less doing whatever he did to me for me to be in this state. I wished that I could kill him. For days after I pictured

going to that hotel and jumping to my death but the Catholic Church admonishes against suicide and it was just as bad as the abortion he proposed.

Desperate beyond being restrained by fear, I phoned my dad and asked if Uncle Arturo had talked to him about my condition. He said he had. I also told him of Frank's response. Dad said, "Give me his phone number." The only number I had was the hotel number. "I will call you later," Dad said. He called Frank to meet with him and, to my understanding, described what he would do to such a scoundrel if he were in Costa Rica. The result was that Frank asked me to marry him. The American term "shotgun wedding" was unknown to me then; my feeling was simply one of relief that my baby and I would have a home. Our boy was born seven months later in New York while Frank was off flying. Mrs. Vieto said that over the telephone he sounded very happy to have a son and he kept saying, "A boy? Oh boy, oh boy!"

Like a good Catholic, I wanted the child baptized right away. Mrs. Vieto said it should be done in a Spanish-speaking church, so we arranged for the ceremony at Our Lady of La Esperanza, a block or so off Saint Nicholas Avenue. Our boy was christened Francisco Antonio, like his father Francis Anthony, except in Spanish. Frank, who was off flying, missed the ceremony.

Despite the crude introduction to marriage and motherhood, Frank was a very striking man who fascinated me. He looked like Richard Widmark, Jack Palance,

Marlon Brando, and Charlton Heston all wrapped into one. Actually, he was sometimes one and sometimes another, never really himself, but always playing some kind of role. His moods were so many and so frequent I never knew which person had just left or who would be coming back. I could never reconcile the sharp and fresh looking Frank in his captain-pilot suit with the Frank who would come home after golf irate because somebody did something or other. When he drank he had to blame somebody. I really lived in fear of his moods. The comical fellow that used to tell so many funny stories at the dancing school was lost. Frank kept us all on a seesaw and it was only much later that I realized the unsettling effect this had on the children.

I was not the kind of person who dreamed or planned. I lived in the moment, a lesson I had learned as an orphaned child. Yes, at age seven I felt confident enough to ask the township policeman of Naranjo, Costa Rica, where I lived why he always greeted me with, “Niña, yo te salvé” (Little girl, I saved you). He then explained that he had pulled me as an infant from the grotto pond in front of the church. Disbelieving, I immediately ran home to Grandmother Camacho, the head of our household, and she confirmed the story. It was said that my distraught mother had thrown me in the water. The person I had always known as my father, and still today call Dad, adopted me as an infant and gave me his family name: Camacho. With that disturbing knowledge I felt

disconnected around those cousins who I regularly played with. I had to keep my wits about me, make no mistakes, voice no complaints, ignore their occasional comments about *la recogida* (the rescued one), and appear that I really belonged in that family. And I had done that with my family on this trip. On this final leg of the journey to Abadan, I felt proud of myself and believed myself contented and even protected.

Looking out the window, I was fascinated by the extent of the desert. The landscape appeared desolate and isolated—free from any signs of life or people. I had never seen a desert and it was like my first view of the ocean in Costa Rica, when I moved from the hill town of Naranjo down to Puntarenas on the Pacific coast: water all the way to the horizon. Undulations in the sand created a multitude of colors that rolled on for miles and miles. Overhead the sky so blue made the sun look brighter than ever. Then I saw a caravan down below us winding dreamily across the sand like the caravans I used to envision as a little girl, when someone told me stories about the desert.

Flying away from my old life and feeling secure at last, I thought back to the terrible ordeal my children and I had experienced during that first flight out of New York. How grateful I was that God had been so merciful in my life and that now all was well: the way it should be from now on. Finally, I fell sleep and dreamt of my family riding in a caravan, all of us on one camel for miles and miles without end. It was so hot by day and so cold at night. Then my

dream turned into a nightmare. Something began chasing us, and we were running for our lives.

“Wake up, Isabel!” Frank called from the cockpit. I awoke to his voice, wondering if I had been running in my dream from the abusive Frank, the one who needed to empty the bottle and then look for something to be angry about. It was frightening living with this man who was totally unpredictable. He was like the expression, “when he was good, he was very good, but when he was bad, he was very bad.” I was so naive I did not yet realize that my worst enemy was my husband.

“Are we in Abadan?” I asked, seeing that my children had also fallen asleep during our flight.

“Yes,” said Frank. “This is the end of the line.”

Karachi, Dacca...and Back ~ Searching to Reclaim My Children



FRANK IN HIS ELEMENT