



THE LONGEST NIGHTS  
WITH JOY ARE SHORT

The exact year of Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi's birth remains a mystery. She gauges her age not by the passing years, but instead in relation to important events. She was maybe twelve, maybe fourteen, when her father Majid died on a hot summer day in 1958. He was a member of Sharjah's ruling family and had earned a reputation during his life in Sharjah's busy Al Arsa Souk as an adjudicator of disputes. Amidst the shops, people could always recognize him by his *daftar*, or notebook. Later in life, Majid bin Saqr was able to afford the construction of three mudbrick houses, *makhzans*, for his three wives and seven children. One *makhzan* was in Al Shuwaiheen (also known as Al Sharq), and the other two were close to Sharjah Fort, Al Hisn, in an area known as Fareej Al Shyookh. Majid's main house, constructed in the 1940s just south of Al Hisn on what later became Bank Street, or Al Burj Street, was the largest. For months, contracted laborers, women and men, mixed mud with rocks from the sea before baking the bricks to complete the three *makhzans*. Majid spent each night in one of the houses, traveling between them on horseback and later by Jeep. Nama was Majid's eldest daughter and recalls that, around the time when he was building the *makhzan* where she lived, Sharjah's ruler Sultan bin Saqr Al Qasimi II (who reigned from 1924 to 1951) died in London.



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Majid's life was cut short by sudden illness. A few days before he passed, he noticed a skin rash, and his fingertips turned greenish. His wife and Nama's mother, Mouza Al Mashghouni (1930–2017), took him to Dubai, where the region's only clinic functioned under the purview of a British doctor named "Macooley."<sup>1</sup> Realizing that his time was nearing its end, he called for Nama and recited to her a famous poem:

فقصارهن مع الهموم طويلة وطوالهن مع السرور قصار  
(The shortest nights with sorrow are long ...  
And the longest with joy are short.)<sup>2</sup>

Nama's mother Mouza, now widowed, was in her twenties and bereft of a male breadwinner. To provide the family with a livelihood, their first cousin Khalid bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, who would become ruler of Sharjah in 1964, gave them a brand-new Singer sewing machine. Their mudbrick house came to double as a workplace, where they tailored dishdashas and *nafnoofs* (women's dresses, also called *gawan* after the English word "gown"). Mouza, herself illiterate, knew that education was key to her daughters' success. Despite the conservative society's norms, she chose to never marry again and focused instead on sending her daughters to school. In 1960, the family moved to a small new brick house,



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which Mouza had built with her inheritance. The house consisted of four adjacent units under a *liwan*, or colonnaded veranda. Mouza had sketched out the design herself on a piece of paper which she handed to the Iranian contractor named Hussein.

Although Nama cannot confirm the year of her birth, she does know for certain that she was born in winter because her mother gave birth to her in a *khaima*, a tent made of palm tree fronds woven, or “stitched,” together as tightly as possible to protect inhabitants from cold winds and rain. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century, concrete and even mudbrick structures were few and far between in Sharjah. The majority of them were inhabited by members of the ruling family, wealthy merchants, and Western officials. Most of the indigenous population lived their winters in *areesh*, also called *barasti*, homes. Rectangular in plan, the areesh summer homes were, like the khaimas, constructed of stitched palm fronds, but the weave held together loosely, letting in not only more air but also snakes and spiders. Nama’s family fetched water from the town’s well, a long walk away. She recalls having to use her *sheila*, a light garment worn by women over their shoulders, to filter sand and small seashells from the water she collected.

For a teenage girl in 1960s Sharjah, balancing work, study, and life was a challenge. While food and income were in short supply, Nama benefited like many others from the largesse of Kuwait’s emir, Abdullah Al Salim Al Sabah. By 1952, he had ordered his government to build schools and send supplies to inhabitants of towns in the lower Arab Gulf. Sharjah’s ruler, Sheikh Saqr bin Sultan Al Qasimi, regularly traveled to Kuwait to request aid from the emir, who had visited Sharjah in November 1951. Kuwaiti aid proved instrumental to hundreds of individuals who otherwise would not have had a chance to study. Nama recalls that, as a student, she would receive a *kiswa*, a package of clothing, from the Kuwaiti



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government. It included two sets of garments, one for the winter and one for the summer, and a pair of shoes. By the mid-1960s, the *kiswa* also included vitamins, but Nama had graduated by then.

In 1953, the Palestinian teacher Kafa Al Sarraj handed out copies of a first-grade lesson book from the Kuwaiti benefactors and asked each student to read aloud from it. Depending on their reading proficiency, students were then separated into grades. As Nama had learned to read and write from her maternal grandfather, Hamad Al Mashghouni (1898–1988), a merchant who studied religion in Qatar and officiated marriages, she recited the text effortlessly and was assigned to a higher grade.<sup>3</sup>



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Between 1953 and 1964, Nama studied at the Kuwait-funded Fatima Al Zahra School. The school attracted a number of visitors including Abdulaziz Husain (1920–1996), who served as Kuwait’s first ambassador to Egypt and later as education minister. He inspected classrooms and assessed the education level of the students. The school occupied a large house owned by the Bin Kamel family not far from Al Hisn, initially accommodating both girls and boys until the latter were moved to Al Qasimiyah School, also funded by Kuwait. To graduate from high school, Nama had to pass final exams administered in Kuwait. The head of the Kuwait Office for Education,

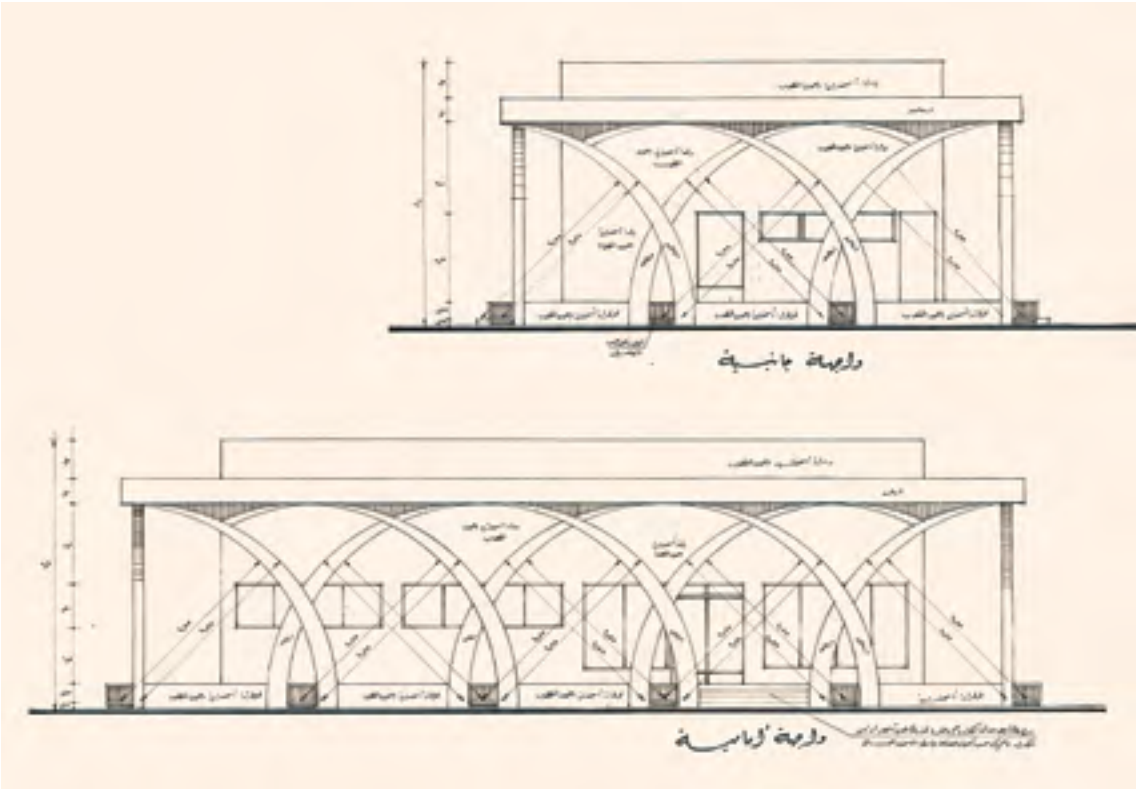


Hamad Al Moumin, organized a trip to Kuwait for the Sharjah girls to complete their studies. During that trip, Nama stayed in a girls' dormitory for a few weeks with three other girls from Sharjah: Aisha Sayyar, Aisha Al Qasimi, and Amina Salim Al Hajri.<sup>4</sup> Upon returning to Sharjah, Nama became a teacher at Fatima Al Zahra School, where she taught Arabic, mathematics, religious studies, and science.

Kuwait's presence in the Trucial States would have a further impact on the young teacher. During her last year of high school, a distant cousin landed at Sharjah's airport, returning from his nearly twelve-year stay in Kuwait. Saud bin Khalid (1939–2005) had grown up between Bombay and Kuwait City. Living with his grandmother and younger brother, Saud first studied at Salahuddin School before working as a *myaoumiya*, a daily wage earner, and at a hospital. In 1961, upon hearing that Kuwait planned to open an office in his homeland, he applied for a job. On Wednesday, January 2, 1963, the Kuwait Office was officially inaugurated in Dubai, and twenty-four-year-old Saud bin Khalid became its first treasury secretary, responsible for distributing Kuwait-government salaries to judges, imams, and teachers. At first, Saud lived in the house of his wealthy merchant father, Khalid bin Khalid Al Qasimi (1906–1982), adjacent to Mouza Al Mashghouni's mudbrick home. A first



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attempt at marriage had faltered when the fiancée's father asked Saud to build a makhzan for his daughter close to his own, a prohibitively costly request for the young clerk. Saud's stepmother Mariam Al Shamsi suggested he marry his half-sister's neighborhood friend, Nama. Saud and Nama married on July 2, 1964. Following the wedding, Khalid bin Khalid offered his son the house's annex, which featured a large *barjeel*, or wind tower, to which Saud added two rooms. Saud and Nama lived there for six years.

In 1970, Saud and Nama asked their close family friend Ismail Al Zarooni, who operated one of Sharjah's few modern construction firms, to build them a house in Sharjah's Al Fayha district based upon a design by the Palestinian engineer Adnan Saffarini.<sup>5</sup> The single-story, two-bedroom house was finished in the summer of 1971 and cost 75,000 dirhams, the equivalent of \$15,800. The Fayha house was a significant upgrade from the mudbrick structure in which Nama had grown up. It included a larger garden with a fountain and was situated in a district famous for its tarmac road. Opposite their home was a German colony of engineers working on Sharjah's new port. Next door was the ruler Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed's diwan.

Saud encouraged his wife to continue working.<sup>6</sup> During Nama's seven-year career as a teacher, from 1964 to 1971, she often earned more than her husband. She had faith in his business acumen, nevertheless, and handed him her entire salary at the end of each month. In 1972, Nama became a member of the Sharjah Women's Association, the first such organization in the country. The association was chaired by Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed's wife, Noura bint Sultan Al Qasimi, and managed by Aisha Mohamed Al Noman. The Women's Association, registered in 1974, later merged with the federal General Women's Union on August 27, 1975. In 1977, the Women's Association moved to a purpose-built facility.<sup>7</sup> It was there that the seeds of a new organization, the Sharjah Cooperative Society, were sown. Nama, along with forty men and women including her sister and mother, as well as Aisha Mohamed Al Noman and Aisha Ahmed Abdul Rahman, each invested 10,000 dirhams, or \$2,500, to start the Sharjah Cooperative Society in March 1977, the first of its kind in the UAE. The co-op's small grocery store operated out of the Maysaloon neighborhood until a store built for the purpose was opened in Al Fayha.<sup>8</sup>



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By the late 1970s, Nama and Saud's family had outgrown their two-bedroom home. They now had five children and a sixth on the way. Conny Fernandes, a live-in maid from Goa, joined the household in 1972. For the next half century, she played a major role in raising two generations of the family.

Having quit his Kuwait Office job in 1967, Saud started investing in the construction of shops in Sharjah's expanding souk. He leased the new spaces to the increasing number of expatriates arriving in town to set up new lives. This influx converted into a booming business. Saud's business deals brought him into contact with Ashok Mody, an architect from Bombay who designed the family's new home in Sharjah's Al Ramla district. Mody had just finished work on Al Zahra Hospital and the 1000 Villas project.<sup>9</sup> His design for Saud and Nama's new house was so imposing that the architect nicknamed it "The Citadel." As the house took shape, one of Saud's cousins remarked that the house was "so large that, if invaders came, they would think that it is the ruler's house." Without any adjacent roads, Saud and Nama had to walk over sand from Al Fayha to visit the new construction site. The project was overly ambitious and stood idle for months. It was only after a wild animal entered the Fayha house and bit one of the children that Saud decided to call Sharjah's ruler Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad to ask for help. The ruler visited the house and donated doors, a Persian carpet, and a framed work of art bearing the word Allah, also suggesting that the master bedroom be expanded by knocking down a wall. Nama hired an Italian woman known as "Um Juliana" to design the interior and the family moved in by 1980.

By this time, Nama had retired from teaching and was playing a major role in her husband's construction business. In the afternoons, she visited construction sites of the buildings and shops that she co-owned with her husband. She used the labor lifts to inspect the room layouts. Bricks would be laid out to outline floorplans, on which she would base her design modifications. In one instance, when Saud was about to buy a plot of land, she brought up the site's major shortcoming—it lay directly under the nearby airport's flight path. Saud took her advice and decided against the purchase.

Perhaps she gained this foresight about the skies in her childhood days, spent in her father's home. Like many other Sharjah residents in the 1960s, Nama sought nocturnal refuge from the summer heat by laying modest mattresses on the rooftop in the hope

of catching a breeze. To maintain privacy, a parapet of perforated gypsum tiles, about a meter high, crowned the roof of Nama's small villa. The parapet may have kept peering eyes at bay but did little to contain the rumble of airplanes flying overhead, departing from the nearby Imperial Airways Airport.

It was on this rooftop, one afternoon in early 1964, that a friend took a snapshot of her using a new camera that she had bought for four rupees (or Qatari riyals) at Souk Sager. Nama had climbed up to the roof overlooking Al Hisn's *mushrif* tower, wearing a green polka-dot dress, a pair of earrings, a few golden bracelets on her right wrist, a watch on her left, and the only pendant she owned around her neck. The photograph taken that afternoon captured a moment in Nama's youth before she knew the future that life held for her. It shows Nama smiling, and behind her lies a spare concrete tile featuring a five-pointed star inside a crescent. On that afternoon, Nama was unaware that, in the next few months, her life would take a major turn. As a new ruler assumed power, she would receive a marriage proposal and graduate from school to become one of the first two teachers of Sharjah's modern school curriculum. Ultimately, she would play a vital role in helping educate a generation and propel the city forward into the twenty-first century.

#### Notes:

1. British medical officer Dr. Desmond McCauley operated Al Maktoum Hospital in Dubai.
2. Translation of poem (author contested) by Labiba Laith.
3. Other Palestinian teachers included Sharifa Al Ba'ba', Laila Al Mazeeni, and Itidal Al Saffarini who taught English. The school's director, also Palestinian, was Muhammad Diyab Al Musa.
4. In order to supplement her family's low income, Nama participated in writing competitions. In the early 1960s, she submitted her work to one such competition sponsored by *Al Arabi* magazine, under the pseudonym of Janet Al Qasimi, and won a considerable sum.
5. For more information on Al Fayha, see Abdulla Saad Moaswes's article, p. 253.
6. In 1967, her third year as a teacher, Nama headed the student delegation to Kuwait for the final exams. Most of the eight or so high school students accompanying her, including her younger sister Mahra, Noura Abdul Rahman Al Midfa, and Aisha Salem Al Hajeri, also became teachers.
7. The Sharjah Women's Association facility was designed by Arab Engineering Bureau.
8. The store was designed by Egyptian architects M. F. Howeedy & Associates.
9. See Al Zahra Hospital, p. 325, and 1000 Villas, p. 351.



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#### Images:

01. Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi with her students at Fatima Al Zahra School, 1970. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.
02. Nama (right) and her sisters Mahra and Farida in their areesh house, 1956. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.
03. Areesh houses in Sharjah, 1961. Collection of Mohammed Shamis Al Maazmi, courtesy of Ahmad Al Maazmi.
04. The *liwan* house, 1966. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.
05. Conny Fernandes, Majid bin Saud, and Noura bint Saud in the Fayha house, 1972. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.
06. Students of Fatima Al Zahra School, 1953–54. Nama is second from right, front row. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.
07. Nama (top row, left) during a visit by the Arab League delegation to Fatima Al Zahra School, October 1964. Standing next to her is fellow native Sharjah teacher Amina Salim Al Hajri. Fifty years later, both women were recognized by the UAE government as the first woman Emirati teachers in formal education. To the right of Al Hajri is Egyptian teacher Zainab Al Araby. Third from left in the second row is Layla Al Mazini, recruited with her husband Abdul Moti Morad by the Kuwait Office in 1957. First row (from right): Assistant Secretary General of the Arab League Sayed Nofal, Sharjah Ruler Sheikh Saqr bin Sultan Al Qasimi, Arab League Secretary General Abdul Khalek Hassouna, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Kuwait Mohamed Mansour, and Iraqi delegate to the Arab League Mahmoud Ali Daoud. Badr Khalid Al Badr, courtesy of Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait.
08. Front and side elevation of a prototype for the Sharjah Cooperative Society, Consulting Architecture & Civil Engineering Bureau (CAB), undated. CAB.
09. The Ramla house under construction, late 1970s. Architectural Consultants, Ashok Mody.
10. Sharjah Women's Association, late 1970s, Arab Engineering Bureau. Al Azmenah Al Arabiya.
11. Nama photographed by her friend on the roof of the liwan house, 1963. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.