

**Chapter 2**

19 February, 2004

Dear Friends:

“Sleigh bells ring, are you listening? In the lane snow is glistening...” Yes, I do know that Christmas is long past, however as I ended my last letter by talking about Christmas, I thought I could begin this one by telling you a little of what I experienced this Christmas, before I forget entirely. Of course, I was planning to send this letter out much sooner, but even here in Egypt, time can fly. And yes, sleigh bells did ring here at Christmas, and continue to ring. Okay, maybe they are not exactly sleigh bells. Though I heard (and still hear) bells frequently that remind me of sleigh bells, the bells here adorn a variety of animals pulling conveyances, including donkeys, and horses that are pulling anything from vegetables to garbage and everything in between. But if you closed your eyes and ignored all the horns, and ignored the temperature, you could almost think you were hearing sleigh bells in the snow. Okay, maybe I’m stretching, but I do find the sound of the bells cheery even if they are simply put on for the practical purpose of making these vehicles more noticeable.

In Egypt, I got to celebrate Christmas twice. I celebrated my traditional Christmas (December 25) mainly with MCC friends and of course a phone call home. I spent a few weekends before Christmas, baking Christmas cookies with friends. I hadn’t brought any recipes with me, but my sister came to the rescue by sending me several of my favourite cookie recipes. On Christmas Eve, I had a dinner of roast beef and mashed potatoes with friends (MCC and a few others). Then in the evening, we went to midnight mass at “All Saints’ (Episcopal) Cathedral”. In my tradition, I have not typically gone to mass on Christmas Eve and experienced communion. So it was good to have a slightly different focus and look ahead to Easter and Christ’s death while celebrating his birth. It seemed very fitting to participate in communion as part of the Christmas celebration. On Christmas day we had a MCC Christmas party with a fairly traditional Christmas dinner of turkey, mashed potatoes and the fixings. In many ways (except that I was not home with family) it was a traditional Christmas with lots of food, and Christmas carolling. If you didn’t look outside you could almost think you were back home.

In the Coptic Orthodox Church, Advent is celebrated quite differently than I am used to. The Christians are encouraged to fast from the end of November until midnight January 6. I am used to parties before Christmas with lots of food. This way of preparing for Christmas is quite different than I am used to. I did not actually participate in the fast, but it did make me wonder about the difference in preparing for Christmas by abstaining instead of indulging. Then on January 6 & 7, I celebrated the Orthodox Christmas. The sisters at the convent I live at went to Beni Seuf (where their “mother” convent is located) for Christmas and so I went along. I stayed at an MCC couple’s place – Brad & Jennifer, who live in Beni Seuf. Though their place is small, they welcomed me and made room for me, by having one of their children sleep on the couch in the living room. The children put together a small Christmas tree from some branches they were able to scrounge and made presents for each other. It was truly a blessing to be included with their family at Christmas and was certainly a highlight of the season. Christmas Eve (the 6th) we all went to the Christmas Eve service at the Orthodox Church. The service was several hours long, and so we did not stay for the whole evening.

Christmas day (the 7th, I found myself wanting to talk about it as “the 25th”) we went visiting! As I understand, Christians generally spend this day, or at least part of it, visiting and stopping by at various places throughout the day. Just like “our Christmas” they also seem to have chocolate everywhere (though not as much, nor as much variety). I went with Brad & Jennifer and several others to visit the bishop, a boy’s home, a girl’s home, and the convent. We got a chocolate at most places as well as oranges, bananas, and tea at the convent. We were then invited to have lunch at the convent. As is traditional here, lunch was at 2PM. For lunch, we had chicken, rice, and soup. After lunch, I went with Brad & Jennifer to another home. We were again provided with a big feast, including, chicken, beef, potatoes, rice, beans, and more. Then in the evening, we went to visit another

home, where they too fed us, chicken, soup, pasta, meat rolls, beef, etc. So if you were counting, that is 3 huge meals after 2PM in the afternoon. The hosts were somewhat unhappy with us (at least they said they were) for not eating more. I finally responded by saying that I would not be happy if I ate more! Maybe not the correct response, but I assure you, I did my best to help them eat their food. They were delicious meals; I just don't need 3 of them in one afternoon! I met some lovely people and had a really enjoyable Christmas.

Some of you may be wondering about my living situation. When I first came to Egypt, I lived in a small flat on the top floor of the building where the Egypt MCC Country representatives live. I stayed there for approximately 2 weeks, as I got adjusted somewhat to life in Cairo. Then I moved out to my current home in Ezbet El Nakhl. Ezbet El Nakhl is on the northeast outskirts of Cairo. Fortunately the MCC office is also in this direction. The MCC office is about halfway between here and downtown. Many people who have lived in Cairo for awhile have no idea where Ezbet El Nakhl is located. I have yet to find the area of Ezbet El Nakhl on any map. The closest I've come is a map that includes the metro stop before my metro stop and then vaguely names the area I live in without showing any details. Personally I think it would be hard to represent the area with any degree of accuracy on a map. The streets are narrow and plentiful, and I don't think many of them have names, though it is possible they do. When I was beginning to write in the Arabic script, my language tutor suggested among other things that I write the name of the street I live on. "Well", I said, "I don't know the name of the street." "Then," quoth he "it is a good chance for you to practise reading Arabic, by reading the name of your street". At this point I had to laugh and tell him, I have yet to see a street sign in this area. Anyway, while it is certainly possible there is a name for my street, I don't know what it is. (If you're wondering about my mailing address, it is the mailing address for the MCC office.) This is far enough out of Cairo that there are actually still a few small fields in and around this area.

I have a small bedroom in a convent run by the "daughters of Saint Mary". The sign at the entrance proclaims this to be Salem Centre. I share a bathroom with the guest room next door, so, though it is mostly private, I do have to share it occasionally. I have a shower that has a small hot water tank, allowing for relatively quick showers only (at least if I want them hot). The centre itself is "a little haven" in the centre of... well, something else. The convent has 3 floors; I am on the 2nd floor. I have a corner room. There is a balcony that runs all around the outside of the building. The balcony where I am located overlooks a garden with trees and some vegetables. It is absolutely beautiful. My room is in the northeast corner of the building, so I get the morning sun. As the weather is still generally cool, I love to sit on the balcony in the sun in the morning while I read, or study Arabic. I'm sure I will be grateful for less sun as the temperature gets warmer. During the day there is the almost constant chirping of birds to be heard in the garden. I am very grateful for this beautiful place.

As I said, I live in a convent. There are approximately 13 - 14 sisters that live here I am told. I have never seen that many together at any given time. Their ability to speak English seems to vary a great deal. A couple are fairly fluent, while some speak hardly any. I am now able to frequently tell them basic things that I need to in Arabic, though I still can't understand the conversation around the table. When I'm at the convent, I eat meals with the sisters. Breakfast is around 8AM usually, except for Wednesdays and Fridays which are fasting days, and they don't eat breakfast. (I still get breakfast those days.) Breakfast, generally consists of bread (which is somewhat like pita), cheese, and eggs. They have a very salty, strong-tasting cheese they eat, but usually provide a milder cheese for me, which I must say I do appreciate. Occasionally, there may be jam, or molasses. During fasting periods, breakfast may be beans or molasses with bread. Lunch is at 2PM and on non-fasting days consists of rice mixed with some noodles, some cooked vegetable or vegetable soup (usually in a tomato base), meat (most frequently chicken, sometimes chicken liver, stomach, heart, occasionally beef), and bread. They also have pasta and lentil dishes occasionally. Dessert at lunch is a fruit; at this time most frequently oranges, sometimes bananas. On days when they are fasting, they eat no meat, eggs, or milk. On some fasts they may eat fish, others they don't eat fish either. Supper is usually around 9PM. Supper on non-fasting days is usually bread, eggs, cheese, and a raw vegetable like cucumbers or lettuce. On fasting days, supper is usually beans, bread, pasta, sometimes also potato salad, or French fries. (During events like advent or lent, meal times may change depending on when they have their liturgy and how long it is at that particular time of year.) They have approximately 250 fasting days a year. When I'm here, I eat the foods they prepare. However, I am currently leaving the convent at least 4 times/week for Arabic lessons and/or other reasons and so do end up eating a number of meals elsewhere. You

may have noticed I use “usually” a lot. It’s because I’ve learned that just when I expect something to be one way, it ends up being different. Since the page is now full, I guess I’ll have to sign off and write more another time!

Sincerely yours,

Gloria E. Dueck

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