

## Of Legends

### Damascus

“Never be afraid to sit awhile and think.”

~Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

It was just after the afternoon prayer. The winter wind whistled through the tangled alleys of the Old City. The clouds cleared to reveal details of the towering minarets amid the peach patches of sky while I ambled along Sharia al-Qaimariyya in search of a fabled café. At Bab an-Nafura (the Fountain Gate), where I had crossed the threshold of the Great Mosque at dawn, I found what I was looking for.

I entered Al Nawfara (The Fountain) Coffee Shop across the Great Mosque’s eastern wall. The café is famed for its tea, *sheesha* (a water pipe for smoking tobacco) and *hakawati* (storytellers). A few locals nodded at me while they inhaled smoke through a mouthpiece and blew it into the air. It wasn’t my first time in an Arab country; I knew that I would be mistaken as a local, as I had been every so often.

In the veranda people had started to gather for a relaxing afternoon before the *maghrib*, the prayer after sunset; others had found tables in the smoke-filled space inside. It was almost five o’clock, time for storytelling, a common feature of Arab street life since the 12th century.

With coffee drinking becoming increasingly popular during the Ottoman period, the *hakawati*, so the story goes, moved from the streets into the coffeehouses. I did not see anyone drinking coffee, however. Everybody was drinking tea.

Inside birdsong and the rhythmic huskiness of Arabic intermingled. Two canaries in a birdcage between the ceiling and the cornice were warbling, their feet pattering against the wires.

Incandescent lights hung from the five-meter ceiling, where there were remnants of *ablaq* (alternating rows of limestone and basalt, commonly found in Islamic architecture). Other traces of former grandeur were the trellis windows, the marble floor and the wooden walls. On the walls hung photos of Old Damascus, landscape paintings, oil portraits, images of *norias* and Krak des Chevaliers, a rapier, an anchor clock and a photo of the President.

I ordered tea and *sheesha* while waiting for Abu Shadi (“the father of Shadi,” “Shadi” being a common loving reference to a man’s eldest son). Abu Shadi is one of the last Arabic storytellers who remain faithful to the tradition and the last of the Syrian *hakawati*.

In one of the Arabian Nights tales, a king, in search of the most wondrous story, finds a *hakawati* seated on his storyteller’s throne in Damascus, telling the most beautiful stories the king has ever heard. In present-day Damascus, there is still an old man who narrates epics, folk tales and legends in an old coffeehouse. His name is Abu Shadi.

When he was young, Abu Shadi loved to read stories and would go with his father to a café to listen to the *hakawati*’s tales, like those of Aladdin and the magic lamp and the legendary adventures of Baibars, a Mamluk Sultan in 13th-century Egypt. Following his father’s wishes, he revived the profession of the *hakawati* in the ’70s and to this day tells stories at Al Nawfara Coffee Shop.

The clack and shuffle of the waiters’ feet on the black-and-white marble floor punctuated the chatter and excitement of the people coming in. The waiters in *sharwal*, balancing braziers of hot coals and trays of tea, swayed gracefully between the tables, yelling out orders to the kitchen crew.

The café is an excellent people-watching vantage point. And, like other restaurants and cafés in Syria, Al Nawfara allowed me to look at people without worry, though intense scrutiny from countless pairs of eyes embarrassed me a little. Staring at people may be considered rude in Manila and elsewhere, but in this part of the world, it is quite the norm.

I was drinking my tea when a group of Turkish-looking young men and women crowded into the café. They were dressed in peacoats and parkas. It was 5°C in Damascus, the coldest I had ever experienced.

In no time Al Nawfara was full. Some locals sat against the wall, while others, perhaps less interested in the performance, took the seats near the kitchen. A few seemed lost in thought. And one man dozed in a corner.

My *sheesha* arrived before the *hakawati*. It was a blue glass with a long red pipe. With a pin the waiter prodded holes, about eight, in the aluminum foil, and he placed three coals in a triangle on top, allowing the tobacco to burn evenly. I smoked the *sheesha* through the heat from the charcoal kindled on the foil. The hose attached to the grommet drew smoke from the glass base filled with water, which cooled and filtered the smoke. Before long I slid off into a deep and mellow state.

This was nothing new to me. Every time we would eat at Shawarma Snack Center, probably the most authentic Middle Eastern restaurant in Manila, I would smoke *sheesha* for hours. The restaurant, owned by a Jordanian married to a Filipina, is bathed with light from Moroccan lamps and filled with fruit-flavored aroma from water pipes. A carpet hung on the wall bears the image of a Bedouin outside his tent in the desert, with a *sheesha* and a camel. A friend of mine once declared that I am at peace when I am there. “*Lumalabas ang pagka-Arabo mo* (your Arab origin shows),” he said.

Everyone became still when an old man in trousers and waistcoat went up to the elevated, brocade-upholstered throne at the front of the room. This was the storyteller’s stage and the old man was Abu Shadi. He sat on the chair and donned a red *tarboosh* with a regal gesture. He then looked at the audience and smiled.

I was relishing the apple-flavored tobacco and watching Abu Shadi get ready when a white-haired woman in an ocher robe asked me:

“Do you speak English?”

“Yes, I do.” I smiled.

“Can you translate the story for me later?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak Arabic.” I smiled again.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m studying oral traditions,” she said.

I learned that she was taking her PhD in linguistics in Denmark. She reminded me of Karen Blixen, lost in a world completely different from hers.

Anticipation hung thick as smoke in the air, and the sweet smell of *sheesha* lingered. The crowd fell silent as Abu Shadi began to narrate his version of a famous story. I didn’t understand a word, but I found the glottal stops and heavy stresses pleasant. In his left hand was a manuscript from which he read occasionally through his glasses. In his right was a staff he pointed at listeners who caught his eye. He would look at the audience as if he were addressing them directly. He knew how to build up to a climax. And, at the moment when the listener had entered into the realm of the story, he used silence to his advantage. At times he would throw in jokes or thump a copper-top table with his staff for emphasis. He had a throaty, resounding voice and his spot-on comic delivery had everyone in fits of laughter.

It seemed, however, that not everyone was listening attentively. I wondered whether they had heard the story before or had learned it in school a long time ago. What probably attracted them to storytelling, I thought, was the sense of theater. After all, the *hakawati* is not just a comic storyteller; he is also a poet and an actor.

In front of me was a good-looking young couple. The man was smoking *sheesha*, the woman a cigarette, and they had their backs to the left side of Abu Shadi’s high chair. They didn’t talk much

and hardly laughed or smiled like the rest of us. They kept staring at each other throughout the storytelling, as if they were lost in their own world.

The waiter came and replaced the coals in the trough of my *sheesha*. The tinkling of spoons in the glasses of tea grew louder. People kept streaming in and out of the café, and a number of them were sending text messages and taking pictures. I might not have understood what was going on every time they roared with laughter, but somehow in the smoky, little room I was at ease.

I noticed that not a single woman in *abaya* could be seen. Save for the Danish lady, the women were all in Western clothes and mingling with the men. I thought this was another world; outside the café, dozens, if not hundreds, of women in *hijab* and *niqab* could be seen walking down the passageways of the Old City beside their men. I had been told they were Iranian Shia pilgrims.

During the storytelling, an old man to my left would look at me as he laughed. I realized I was smiling while listening and gazing at the people in the café. He probably thought I understood Abu Shadi's jokes.

Amid Abu Shadi telling a story, birds chirping, and the audience laughing, I dreamt of spending a night in the red-sand desert, like Lawrence of Arabia venturing into the unknown. I decided that after exploring Damascus and other hidden treasures of Syria, like Bosra and Palmyra, I would wander through Wadi Rum in Jordan, the Valley of the Moon, before I flew back to Manila.

I was startled from my reverie by a gentle tap on my arm. It was the Danish lady. She asked, "Where are you from?"

"I'm from the Philippines," I replied.



## **Malate**

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

My mother snatched my hand and hauled me down the stairs. My feet thudded on the treads. I tried to pull my hand free, but she only tightened her grip.

“*Anak ka ng tatay mo!*” I was my father’s son, she said.

I wriggled till I was able to slip away from her, but she was quick to seize my hair. She dragged me into the dark, dripping passage that reeked of urine and feces. The thought of cold water running down my body and the wet floor, where rats habitually scurried, made me shiver. There was no *comfort* in that room.

My fuzzy hair did not give in so easily either. An intricate lattice of curls and locks, my hair resisted water as a web would resist raindrops. My mother had to dip into the bucket and pour water on my head three times to wet my hair.

“*Bunot*, like your father.” A coconut husk.

She pushed my head down and began soaping me. She then rubbed my head and scrubbed my face until it turned red before finally launching into her morning lecture.

“You should wash every day, or you will get head lice.”

“Mama, Wella said that no louse would dare live in my head. It couldn’t breathe,” I said.

“Don’t ever listen to that horse,” she said. Wella was my mother’s beautician who called me “Santo Niño,” perhaps because of my curly hair.

After the compulsory shower, I dressed for school in oversized shoes and a wrinkled shirt. It was the first day of school. I was in fourth grade at the Aurora A. Quezon Elementary School, a three-minute walk from Maria Orosa where we lived and my oasis away from the gloom and chaos of the shanty. But the school was not completely an oasis. A large black statue of Aurora Quezon, the wife of the former President, faced the campus courtyard. Rumor had it that she walked the halls,

looking for her daughter “Baby.” The two had been killed by rebels after the war. Of course, we were afraid to go near the black statue.

In school I wallowed in myths and tales, like the legend of the pineapple, the legend of the monkey, the legend of the rainbow. Everything, it seemed, had a beginning.

However, I hated having to introduce myself and my family on the first day in school. I wished nobody would ask who or what or where my father was. My classmates would call me “*negro*” or “*putok*” or “*Arabuhok*.”



## **Damascus**

*When asked why he refused to enter Damascus, Mohammed, looking out onto the city from the mountainside, said that man should enter Paradise only once.*

The storytelling lasted for forty-five minutes. There was so much to observe and listen to, without understanding a word, that it didn't seem that long. I asked a waiter who appeared to be popular among the locals what the story was about. He said it was the legend of a heroic king. I wanted to ask him who the heroic king was, but he had slipped away.

The coals on my *sheesha* had been replaced many times during the storytelling, but it was getting more difficult to smoke. I had inhaled some ash from the clay bowl that held the tobacco, and was coughing. The coals had to be renewed, so I asked for a new set.

Remembering the suspicious characters smoking *sheesha* in old movies, I held my nose and squinted, imagining I was Omar Sharif. I stayed for another half hour smoking and drinking tea. It was a great way to unwind after a long tour around the Old City.



From the hotel Beit Al Mamlouka, a 17th-century house tucked away in a busy alley in the Christian quarter of Damascus' Old City, it took me only five minutes to reach the Great Mosque (also called Umayyad Mosque), Syria's most sacred edifice.

I removed my shoes at the threshold and stepped into the courtyard with its solemn pavilions and a fountain topped by a wooden pulpit, where the faithful made their ablutions before prayer. Built in the 8th century by Umayyad Caliph Walid I, the mosque occupied an area that at various points in history had been a pagan temple, a Roman temple and a basilica. It started out as a temple of Hadad, the Aramaean god mentioned in the Old Testament. In Roman times it was the Temple of Jupiter; Corinthian columns spanned by a lintel remain to this day. And when Constantine embraced Christianity, the temple was turned into a basilica dedicated to John the Baptist.

Walking on the limestone floor proved to be impossible. The cold seeped through my wool socks and froze my feet. I sat next to the octagonal pavilion with columns and festoons of flora, raised my feet off the icy floor and thought to myself, *You always dreamed of cold weather when you were a boy; now here it is.*

Two young men were taking photos of themselves with the minaret of Jesus, in the southeastern part of the mosque (believed to be the site of the second coming of Christ), as background. One of them asked me if I could take a photo of them. I gladly obliged, thinking of Kahlid and David, my two stepbrothers whom I had never met.

In the middle of the *adhan*, just after midday, a group of female Italian tourists clad in white-hooded cloaks turned up. They were laughing and looked more like nuns in ecstasy than solemn worshippers. The muezzin called the faithful to prayer by reciting the *adhan*, "*Allahu Akbar Ash-hadu an la ilaha an la illa llah...*" and other calls soon echoed through the Old City. Along with

dozens of other people, I strode through the prayer hall on the southern side of the courtyard, listening to the echoes of heaven and earth in euphony.

Inside the mosque was a green-domed shrine believed to contain the head of John the Baptist. Legend has it that when the mosque was being built, a casket containing the head of the saint was discovered here.

An array of mosaics, columns and rich intarsia woods decorated the vast prayer hall, which was divided by two rows of columns into three naves. Beside the white pulpit at the center of the hall sat a man praying in the direction of the main *mihrab*, an alcove pointed toward Mecca. I looked around and saw people bowing, prostrating themselves and touching their forehead to the ground. I sat with my back against the minbar on the red-carpeted floor, wondering whether my father was religious, and imagining the expanse of desert that separated me from him.



## **Malate**

“I know well what I am fleeing from but not what I am in search of.”

~Michel de Montaigne

When I tuned into the BBC the morning of my 25th birthday, all the news was about the death of Michael Jackson. When I met my mother for lunch, I told her about it. She looked at me with sad eyes.

“Your father will be devastated,” she said. I didn’t say a word. She did mention once that my father was a fan of the late King of Pop, but I didn’t know that he was a fanatic. And for the first time, for reasons known only to her, she began to tell me stories about my father.

She first met him in Manila in mid-1982, three years before she flew to Riyadh to work as a domestic helper.

“He would come and go, your father,” she said. “When he returned in 1983, we met again. But I was not the first woman, nor was I the last.”

“He was rich,” she continued. “If not, he wouldn’t have been able to stay in five-star hotels for months.” They stayed at the Westin Philippine Plaza (now Sofitel), Hilton, Holiday Inn, Silahis, and Regent (now Heritage Hotel), where I was conceived, or so I was told.

I look exactly like him, if I were to believe my mother. Like him, I have frizzy hair that doesn’t budge. I also have his dark skin, slender arms and legs, and beady brown eyes.

“You are about as tall and have the same hair, like *bunot*. Your nose, lashes and lips are like his. You have the same hands, feet and knees. You are *balbon*, like him. And like him, you wake up with your eyes still closed,” she said.

*Same knees?* That someone could possibly look very much like me was both appealing and unnerving. But after all that had been said about him, I still found it difficult to imagine his face. I never had a photo of the man.

“I would bathe him at least once a week.”

He was afraid of water. She would shove him to the bathroom and bathe him, and he would be too stoned to stop her. He smoked hashish several times a day, and then he wouldn’t go out of his room for days. He wouldn’t let my mother leave the room either, so she would order food from the hotel—a big platter of food that would be enough for the whole day, mostly for her. He didn’t eat much, so my mother would force him to drink milk. But he would drink only Chivas and Heineken beer.

He would raise the volume on his cassette player to the annoyance of the other guests. *Was he singing his songs? Did he sing*, “She says I am the one, but the kid is not my son...”? *What was his voice like?* I wondered. But I didn’t ask my mother. When Carmi Martin, who was staying in the next

room, knocked on their door and asked him to lower the volume, he touched her breasts in response. So he was thrown out of Regent Hotel.

He might have been *barumbado*, she said, but he was kind. She stayed with him in the face of her friends' disapproval because she loved him. She said this matter-of-factly. It was odd to hear her say those words. They would mostly just stay inside the room, not talking much, just smoking and staring at each other.

They moved to Philippine Plaza after that, but they didn't stay long there either. During a heated argument, my father threw a glass of whiskey in the hotel manager's face. For four months they kept moving from one hotel to another. My father's uncle, who was then a consul in Manila, urged him to return to Riyadh. But my father wouldn't listen.

Their room was a mess. My father shunned room service, for fear that the room boy would see my mother. He didn't want anyone to see her. When he ordered food to be delivered he would tell the hotel staff to stay outside as he himself brought it in.

"He was not on vacation when he came to Manila," she said. One time she found a paper that had been slipped into their room while they slept. The note was about a conference he had to attend. He had missed a lot of those meetings. She didn't know exactly what his job was. All she knew was that he was working for immigration at that time. But even about that she didn't sound very certain. She said that he would often receive calls, but he would just hang up. When she woke him up once because his secretary was on the phone, he became furious and cut off the phone line.

"He wouldn't let me sleep as well," she said.

He would smoke the hashish skillfully packed in the Merit cigarettes that he had brought from Riyadh and not sleep for five days. And then he would sleep the next five days. It was a cycle, she said.

That was my first portrait of my father.



## Damascus

“...a second ray will issue from  
the first and reascend, much like a pilgrim  
who seeks his home again...”

~ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*

From the Great Mosque I strolled down the lane of carpet, rug and souvenir stores toward Al-Hamidiyya, a covered souq next to the citadel. The arched ridged metal roof over this 600-meter stretch of shops was riddled with bullet holes from a French air raid in 1925.

I looked back and watched the pigeons pivoting around the Minaret of Al-Gharbiyya in the southwest of the mosque—a seeming tower of repose. I stood still for a moment, watching the pigeons flying back and forth and the crowd going in and out of the mosque.

The sunlight sliced through the holes, revealing shapes and forms that would otherwise have remained in shadows. I smelled jasmine, lavender and musk in the air. I continued walking through the endless profusion of buyers and sellers, their footsteps on the cobbled street mingling with the cries of hawkers and the braying of donkeys. I must be back in the Middle Ages, I thought, lost in the ancient walls of the city.

The Damascene souqs reminded me of San Andres Market, the public market in Malate. When I was young I would often go there with my mother to buy half a kilo of rice, *daing* or *sapsap*, or, if we were lucky, a quarter of a kilo of beef (for *nilaga*). San Andres is well known for its fruit stalls laden with mangoes, mangosteens, oranges and delicacies like durians. But as a boy all I could

afford to do was look at them. I didn't like going to the fish section; it was always wet, and it reminded me of our grimy *paliguan*.

In Syria I rarely saw fish being sold, but butchers, meat and blood on the streets were a common sight. In one of the labyrinthine alleys of the souq, I saw a bloody camel head hanging on a metal hook and goat testicles swaying off the carcass. There was no pungent smell; the fragrance of musk probably overpowered it.

From the meat section I strolled along the carpet stalls, and from there I stopped at Bakdash, a famous ice cream parlor that opened in 1885, and tried their pistachio-covered booza (vanilla ice cream made of mastic and *salep*). Despite the chilly temperature, Damascenes and tourists thronged into Bakdash.

In Malate I would spend my summer afternoons along Roxas Boulevard, watching seagulls flying over the bay at sunset and waiting for the ringing of *mamang sorbetero*'s bell. I was also hemmed in by a long tradition of street food on Orosa and Bocobo—fish balls and *kikiam*; *betamax*, *adidas*, and my favorite *isaw*. But it was the *sorbetero*'s bell that excited me. The “dirty ice cream” came in different flavors—*tsokolate*, *keso* and *ube*. Like *booza*, it had a coarse texture. Not creamy at all.

Malate also has its share of legends. It was, they said, once flooded by seawater when Manila Bay flowed inland as far as Remedios Circle, contaminating freshwater wells. The place was called “Maalat” in the 16th century because of its saline waters. Malate at that time was not an assembly of streetwalkers, they say, but of chieftains and noblemen.

The alleys to the north in Souq al-Asrouniyya were filled with a vast assortment of toiletries (including the famous Aleppo olive oil soap). I made my way south to stalls of scarves, belly-dancing outfits, silk fabrics and lingerie. I glanced at the skimpy lingerie on the mannequins and wondered what the *niqab*-swathed women passing by were thinking.

When I was young I would watch my mother raise her arms, elbows bent, and slide her hips from side to side. Holding a hip scarf, she would lift her chest and do a shoulder and hip shimmy. She danced mostly at home (when she got bored, I guess) or at the disco of the Ambassador Hotel along Mabini Street (when she was lonely).

From the swarm of fabric stalls, I emerged onto Straight Street (from the Latin *Via Recta*). It stretches 1,500 meters from east (Sharia Bab Sharqi) to west (Souq Medha Pasha). Saul, before he became Saint Paul, had been healed on this street by Ananias, who had been told by God in a vision to go to the street called “Straight” and look for Saul.

Lined with family-run shops selling wooden furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl and engraved brass and copper ware, Straight Street is also famous for arabesque patterns, glass chandeliers, backgammon sets and gold jewelry. This is where artisans have their workshops.

*My mother once told me that my father’s family had a jewelry store in Riyadh. Was he also an artisan?*

I kept walking till I heard the sawing of wood and the clatter of brass. The smell of varnish and wood shavings wafted out from the shops. I watched one artisan at Hassab al-Kazaz and Sons carving a wooden inlaid chest. I was told that he and others like him had been taught by their fathers and grandfathers.

Not too far from the shop, a young man yelled, “I love *Brokeback Mountain!* I love *Brokeback Mountain!*” to every white man passing by. He then came up to me and handed me his business card. It read, “The only thing I can’t resist is temptation.” His bookstore was called “Oscar Wilde.” He asked me to come into his store to drink tea and discuss books. Unsure of his intentions, I politely declined the offer.

*He had lots of books. Since I couldn’t read Arabic, I didn’t know what those books were, my mother said.*

At the western end of Straight Street, in the Souq Medhat Pasha, I bought a red-and-white *keffiyeh*, a checkered scarf used by the Bedouins (the black-and-white scarf is Palestinian, I had been told). I draped it over my head and held it in place with a rope circlet. With the sides of my face and my ears fully covered, it was difficult to see things around me, but I kept the *keffiyeh* on.

*He would sometimes wear shirts if he decided to go to work, but mostly he would wear his white robe and white keffiyeh. He was a regal man.*

While I was rambling around the alleyways of the souq, a man with a donkey who was selling oranges stopped me. He was speaking Arabic. I told him I understood only English. The hawker with smoky eyes then proclaimed:

“Welcome to Syria, my friend. I am the seller of sweetness, giver of love. Do you want my oranges?”

“For free?”

“Ten pounds per piece, my friend.”

“No, *shukran*.”

“Hold on,” he said, stopping me. “I have these.” He showed me a set of daggers from his cart. “These are antiques.”

“I’m sure they are,” I said.

“Yes they are, my friend. Very old.”

“No, *shukran*, my friend.”

He let me go after a while. Dagger in hand, he called out to passing tourists, “Who wants to kill his mother-in-law?”

Before the alleys of sweets and traditional Arab medicines, I went deeper into Souq al-Bzouriyya, a spice market at the eastern end of Souq Midhat Pasha. The vendors here teased and seduced more brazenly. The thick aroma of cinnamon, cumin, coriander, cardamom and saffron,

piled like varicolored sands, mixed with the ancient fragrance of the winter wind. Most famous of all were the Damascus dried rose petals. The story goes that even the vicious Saladin, when invading Jerusalem in the 12th century, was preceded by 500 camels bearing Damascus roses to purify the city before his triumphant entry. In Syria, Damascus rose has various uses, from perfume to potpourris, rose water to ointments. It is also used in the Turkish baths.

Between Straight Street and the Great Mosque was Hammam Nureddin, a 12th-century bathhouse. A man in *sirwal* greeted me with “salamu alaykum” as I entered. He then directed me to an old man in the reception area, who gave me three towels. I left my wallet, camera and shoes with him, as was customary.

I started out in the sauna, stayed there for a few minutes, and then proceeded to the steam room. Afterward I washed myself with olive oil soap and loofah, using a tin vessel to scoop water from an antique white marble basin. I looked around and saw men bathing each other and thought of my father. *Does he also go to the hammam? Maybe not.* Soon I was called to the antechamber for a full body scrub.

An old man asked me to “sleep” on a slab of marble that reminded me of our bathroom at home on Orosa, only cleaner. He looked to be in his late 50s, with gray hair and mustache, slender arms and legs, and green eyes. I lay down and he splashed water on me. I closed my eyes on the pain I felt the whole time he was scrubbing my back.

I washed again and went back to the steam room before I was summoned for a five-minute massage. I had a very cold shower after that and was guided back to the mezzanine, where local men exchanged four or more cheek-to-cheek kisses, relaxed, drank tea and took pictures of themselves. A man who kept talking to me in Arabic wrapped me in a towel and served me hot tea, while my mind wandered off to places it was unwilling to revisit.



## Malate

“But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.”

~Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

Sitting on the floor in front of my mother, I watched her as she opened a plastic sachet of “piso” and took about ten hits from a strip of aluminum foil half a ruler long, heated with a strip of tissue. The room then filled with smoke. She was getting ready to go to the Pearl Garden Hotel.

She could speak some Arabic and cook Middle Eastern food since she had worked for two years in Riyadh and Dammam. This time she was working as a cook for an *Arabiano* staying at the Pearl Garden along Adriatico Street, within walking distance from our home on Orosa.

“Home” was a room with pink wallpaper and green linoleum on the second floor of a shanty, in one of Orosa’s dark alleys. One had to stoop to go through the plywood door. And my mother, small as she was, had to sleep in a semi-crouch, unable to stretch out her legs fully. We had no furniture and the walls were bare, save for the peeling wallpaper.

I didn’t have to beg my mother to take me with her to the hotel. Each time she did, the *Arabiano* gave me money, one hundred pesos or sometimes one thousand. I would stay at the hotel, merrily feasting on pistachios, almonds, cashews, chocolates and dates—things we never had at home.

My mother would work for about two weeks until the *Arabiano* went back to his country and a new one arrived. She signed no contracts and did not work for any agency. All she had were her contacts.

She would usually cook chicken biryani (chicken cooked with jasmine rice and spices) and samosas (triangular meat pies filled with potatoes, peas and onions). I would sometimes watch her cook while I drank my Coke and watched cartoons on TV.

Since we had no TV at home, I spent hours watching TV at the hotel. I particularly liked *Voltes V*, a Japanese cartoon, and I would sing along with the ending song, which I couldn't understand. Later I learned that the song was about a boy looking for his father. In translation it said, "Someday the winds shall sweep away/The clouds hang over the crescent moon/Perhaps there will be a brilliant night/Yet why doesn't father's star shine?"

Most of the *Arabiano* were fond of me because I was half their own. They would put me on their lap and let me play in the hotel room. I no longer remember their names or their faces, but the image of them drinking whiskey and stroking my head and their strong musky scent have stayed with me.

I knew most of the hotels in Manila, like the Sheraton (now Century Park), Midland Plaza, Ramada (which later became the Midtown and is now part of Robinsons Ermita), Riviera Mansion, Hyatt Regency. The kitchens in most of these hotels were bigger than our room on Orosa, and would serve as my playroom.

I didn't mind the squalor of our shanty or the rats and roaches lying in wait in the dark. But the toilet disgusted me. It was always a relief to find myself in hotels with nice toilets.

My mother was not just a cook. She would also bring women to the *Arabiano* for a "stay-in." I knew all of these, even how they *did things*, because they talked about them even when I was around. Though I couldn't speak Visayan well, I understood most of what they were saying.

One of the women was Ate Imelda, a friend of my mother's. She lived in the room next to ours on Orosa. She was overweight and looked Japanese and had a particular liking for strong

perfumes. She smelled of roses or citrus all the time. She had a half-Filipino, half-Arab daughter named Fatima, whom I took care of when Ate Imelda had to work and the *yaya* was not around.

Another was Ate Vangie. She had a Filipino partner and a son. They lived in the room across from ours. One time my mother told Ate Vangie she had found an *Arabiano* for her and he was staying at the Ramada. The three of us walked from Remedios to Nakpil and from there to General Malvar until we reached Herran (now Pedro Gil), where the hotel was. We had dinner at the pool. Later in the evening, I saw Ate Vangie and the *Arabiano* making out in the water.

My mother was well known in the hotels. She got into fights with the security guards or the other women when she was drunk, or when she was in need of “piso.” Because she had made a scene quite a few times, she had been banned from several hotels in Manila.

One day, she made me go to Midland Plaza, the hotel beside Robinsons Mall, which was believed to shelter a half-man, half-snake creature that preyed on beautiful women. She couldn’t go herself because she had been forbidden to enter the hotel. She told me to ask for money from an *Arabiano* whom she had probably known a long time ago. I refused. I cried and cried, and she had to push me to enter the hotel. She hit me until my arms stung and her long nails drew blood. I hated going into hotels on my own. I was embarrassed to ask for money. With my eyes still wet I pressed the elevator button, my head down, afraid to have people see me.

I knocked on the man’s door for I couldn’t reach the doorbell. The *Arabiano* opened it, said hello and let me in. Remembering we had nothing left to eat that day I smiled timidly. He gave me three hundred pesos without delay. It was an easy transaction after all. I didn’t have to stay or talk to him. I left the hotel happy and gave the money to my mother.



**Damascus**                      What I miss,  
  I’ve never had.  
  But I am not a ghost.  
  I am a guest.

The owner of Beit Al-Mamlouka told me that if I could visit only one building to see the beauty of Damascene architecture, it should be the Azem Palace. Built in the 18th century by the pasha of a rich Azem family, the palace, he said, had a majestic courtyard and lush gardens.

I took a short walk from the hotel, and at the entrance to the palace, which is now the Museum of the Arts and Popular Traditions of Syria, I was greeted by a courtyard with lemon trees. Bordered by limestone buildings adorned with *ablaq*, the courtyard also had an octagonal fountain.

The *haramlik* (private area) had rooms with wooden paneling and painted ceilings. Other rooms like the *seramlik* (reception area) displayed a collection of textiles, musical instruments and groups in pilgrimage.

The hotel where I was staying looked similar to the Azem Palace, only smaller. Tucked into a narrow cobbled street, Beit Al-Mamlouka had salmon-pink walls that were easily recognizable. Inside were a courtyard fountain surrounded by candles, a 16th-century archway and Christian frescoes, and a roof terrace that overlooked the Old City.

I would often go up to the terrace surrounded by citrus trees, gaze at the nearby domes of a mosque and a church with their familiar crescent moon and cross, and listen to the calls to prayer. And from my room I could see an orange tree. I would leave the tall windows open in late afternoons so I could look at the tree and the roof terrace, the color of the sky turning peach. And I would listen to the countless birds chirping at sunset.



## Malate

But all of them would have one subject, desire,  
If only my own—but no, not at all; alas,  
I was driven because I wanted to be like others.  
I was afraid of what was wild and indecent in me.

~ Czeslaw Milosz, *Account*

After telling me stories about my father, my mother revealed that I had two brothers from two different Filipina mothers. She told me to look for them online. I did, but I had no luck finding them.

I wondered why my mother had not told me these things before, but then I realized that I had never asked her. So I let her continue telling me stories about my father.

“He would sneak out of the room in the morning, take the complimentary daily newspapers outside the doors and come back laughing. The thought of other guests opening their doors and finding no newspaper made him laugh.

“Your father read a lot. When he read something he didn’t like, he would get angry and raise his hands, cussing.”

He had planned to stay in Manila for only one or two months, but for unknown reasons, he stayed longer than that. He didn’t renew his visa, as he didn’t want to leave the room. His mother would call him many times, asking him to come home, and he would fight with her over the phone. His brother came to the Hilton once to fetch him, only to be thrown out of the room.

He hated visitors. He would get mad when my mother’s friends visited them. He would give them money just so they would leave. He also forbade her to look out of the window, for fear that somebody might see her.

Working in Dammam (1986) and Riyadh (1987) was like being in prison, my mother said. Her face, hands and feet had to be covered every time she went out. She had to wear a burqa and gloves. She was not to be seen and could not go out alone. One day she went with her employers to Al Kariya Shopping Center, and she saw a jewelry store called “Al Hazmi.”

“I was dying to go inside to look for him, but I was terrified of Madam.”

I tried to search the mall and online for my father many times. The mall doesn’t exist, or at least not anymore. And my online search only led me to the pages about the 9/11 suicide bombers who had the same last name as my father’s.

Then in 2011, as if I needed more revelations, my mother mentioned casually over the phone that my father’s grandfather had emigrated from Syria. While watching the Syrian revolution on TV, she had suddenly remembered my father telling her that. I asked her where in Syria. She couldn’t remember.

After years of search and pursuit, I came to accept the possibility that I would never find my father and that he would remain what he had always been—a mirage. So I stopped searching.



## **Wadi Rum**

"I seem to have run in a great circle, and met myself again on the starting line."

~Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

From Damascus I flew to Amman, and from Amman I drove to Wadi Rum, a red-sand desert a hundred kilometers south of Petra. Made famous by the exploits of Lawrence of Arabia, Wadi Rum is a spectacular landscape of russet rock formations and fine red sand. Merchants, Bedouins and crusaders have traveled across it for centuries. If Petra was carved with Nabatean ingenuity, Wadi

Rum was formed by natural forces for millennia. T. E. Lawrence described Wadi Rum perfectly in his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as “vast, echoing and godlike.”

Before sunset I donned my *keffiyeh* and, with the help of a Bedouin, I mounted a camel while it sat. It was not easy because the camel was tall even when seated. I placed my left foot in the stirrup and swung my right leg over the camel’s hump. When the camel stood up, I thought I would fall. The camel leaned forward, so I had to lean back. I gripped the reins and closed my knees firmly around the saddle horn. And, with a *keffiyeh* around my head, I began my journey to the unknown desert.

On our way to Lawrence’s pool, I lost my sunglasses in the sand. When I told the guide about it, he said, “Don’t worry. That only means the desert needs it more.” I looked at the desert and saw broad valleys studded with chiseled rocks stretching about a hundred kilometers. As the sun hit the ridge it produced a golden splendor that matched the color of the sand. We took refuge in a rock crevice and ate our lunch of pita bread, tomatoes, cucumber, lemon and canned tuna.

After sunset we headed back to camp. Outside the compound I saw two camels, big and small. The front legs of the smaller camel were tied together. Inside we had a bonfire dinner with the other travelers who were also spending the night in the desert. I met two Christian Palestinians, brother and sister, with Israeli passports. I told them I wanted to go to Israel one day. They told me it would be difficult for me, because of the Syrian stamp in my passport and my name. They said that they themselves were harassed by the Israeli police at the airport and detained for hours. These two bright young people—the man was taking his PhD in aeronautic engineering in the US, the woman an MA in archaeology—were discriminated against and were unwelcome in their own land.

The smoke from the bonfire filled the hut. I wrapped the *keffiyeh* around my face, but my eyes still smarted. While we all sat before the fire, one of the Bedouins began to tell a story.

“There was once a man with a donkey on a farm.” He paused and looked around to make sure he had everyone’s attention. He continued, “The man would always forget the names of the animals

he called his children, so he would often ask the donkey to remind him. Seeing a goat, he would ask the donkey,

“Who is that?”

“It’s the goat, master.’

“Thank you, donkey,’ the man would say.

“Seeing a cow, he would ask the donkey,

“Who is that?”

“It’s the cow, master.’

“Thank you, donkey.’

“Seeing a camel, he would ask the donkey,

“Who is that?”

“It’s the camel, master.’

“Thank you, donkey.’

“Then seeing...what animal is that with a long neck?” the Bedouin asked us.

“Giraffe!” we all said.

“Thank you, donkey,” the Bedouin said.

The storytelling lasted for a few more hours. The bonfire died down until all that was left of it were the last red coals still burning before they faded into ash. Everyone retired early that night. I looked up to see the stars, but clouds blocked my view. Although it is said that stars shine brightest in the desert, I didn’t see the bright stars that night.

Inside my tent I kept my clothes and shoes on. I covered myself with two layers of thick wool blankets; still, despite my shirt, sweater, jacket and jeans, I was shivering. Then the murmurs around me became softer and I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up at five to see the sunrise. It was still dark when I walked on the wet sand, but the sun was slowly cutting through the dome pillars and sculpted terrain that stretched as far as the Saudi Arabian border. I sauntered with my gloved hands in my pockets, looking at the sand and observing how heavy it was. I thought of my father and how close I had come to him. I thought of Damascus, the city I had learned to love in a short span of time. I thought of Malate, the city that had shaped my childhood. I thought of their legends forgotten and stories lost.

And while dreaming somewhere in the middle of the great valley, I began to create mine.