

Jeddo

by

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(Published in Azuria No2, pp102-107, Geelong Writers Inc, 2012)

I remember the day I realised my grandfather wasn't quite how I thought he was. I had never seen his eyes glow as blissfully as they did on that day. He even tilted his head back a little, wearing a grin of incredulity. He almost looked like a little child who suddenly set his eyes on a large cone of ice cream. I was astounded and became curious to discover the cause of such an extraordinary expression on the usually serious face of Hajji Redha.

We called him 'jeddo': grandpa in slang Damascene dialect. He was eighty-nine. His most enduring image in my mind is his attire and the way he walked. He wore a *qunbaḥ*, a long loose-sleeved white garment striped with pale dotted lines of gold or gray. A golden or gray waistband constrained the garment around his body, but only its front part showed between the two sides of the unbuttoned *saco*, a western-style long double-breasted jacket that reached the knees, worn over the garment. On most occasions the *saco* was plain gray, and sometimes light brown. This attire was typical of elderly

dignified men of the old quarters of major cities of Syria: an odd combination of local and western fashion, but the local image was more predominant, reinforced by his Semitic nose, white short beard and the red *tarboosh*, the fez that covered his baldness. A golden cloth band formed the rim of the *tarboosh*. His black boots looked like those used in the army. Underneath all that, his two-piece underwear were long sleeved, long legged, woolen for the winter, cottony for the summer. I saw him in his underwear, prior to prayers, whenever he performed his ablution using the fountain in the middle of the yard of his traditional Damascene home.

He was a fast walker who hated public transport and never drove a car. He relentlessly walked from his home, to ours, to the family shops, the market places and the café he frequented every night to drink heavy tea in small glasses, and to smoke *argueelah*, the hookah; an utmost distance of one and a half kilometers within the confines of Old Damascus.

When I walked with him as a young boy, I remember that I almost had to run to keep pace. It did not matter that I was only seven, in my shorts and comfortable shoes. It did not matter that he was attired in full gear, had a back-bend and carried between his legs a thirty-year-old hernia that he refused to treat.

It did not matter that his boots never seemed to lose touch with the ground. He would drag his right foot forward, followed by his left. When his left foot reached his right foot, his right foot began again. Perhaps he did not have the strength, or his knees were no longer able to provide the leverage for a normal step, or it could simply have been the hernia. With all this effort, the seriousness on his face never surprised me. Nevertheless, he always seemed determined and heading forward.

When I was younger, and walked with him, he would clasp my hand firmly in his and never let go. His hand was very strong, and his grip was as determined as he was to protect me from the chaotic traffic of the narrow lanes of the market places of Old Damascus: humans, carts, donkeys, bicycles, cars and even buses. Unlike my father or uncle, he always preferred to take Medhat Pasha Street, the main road between the area of his residence and the markets, rather than go through shortcuts in the arterial lanes of the old quarter. This street had no pavements, and in some sections, shop owners, passers-by, drivers and animals seemed to share the same pool of chaos. When the big bus arrived taking more than its share of the road, many pedestrians would run inside shops, or at least stand flat-bodied against the walls of the buildings lining the sides of the street. This did not necessarily stop some cyclists from squeezing themselves between the bus

and the people stuck to the wall, sometimes darting, proudly exhibiting their lunatic skills.

Today, I was not going to feel any pain in my hand. I was twelve years old, and already had all the ingredients of a young man. The thickness of the hair that covered my body was enough deterrent for jeddo to even consider holding my hand again. As I walked beside him, behind or sometimes in front of him depending on traffic conditions, I still had to maneuver skillfully to position myself appropriately within his pace. I could see that when he got concerned about me in the traffic, he would impulsively start raising his hand to hold mine, but quickly throw it back on his chest or raise it to adjust his *tarboosh*.

It was a hot summer afternoon. I was squinting in response to the glare, but he did not seem to change his look. It was partially the serious nature of his face and partially that he was more accustomed to walking. After all, he had been doing this daily routine all his life. Despite that his younger brother, who was his business partner, took care of the business, Jeddo never retired and frequented his shop daily. My father and uncle ran another stream of the business in a shop nearby. It was jeddo's habit to visit his sons' shop before he continued to his, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Every afternoon after the third prayer of the day following his siesta, he

would walk again towards the shops located in what was once the silk market, of which he was a prominent merchant.

We left the main street and entered the covered 'seed market' or *Bzooriya* that specialises in seeds, nuts, dried fruits, chocolates, perfumes and oil. Now, his expression only changed when he repeatedly responded to greetings by shop owners who knew him as an important customer or acknowledged his status and seniority in business. He greeted them by casually raising his hand to touch his *tarboosh* in salute, then tapping his hand to his chest in emphasis, along with a wide smile that made his lips part to reveal the only two remaining front teeth in his mouth. He never had any dentures. He had gums stronger than teeth.

The next market was the jewelers' with its rich display windows adorning a relatively large area behind the great Umayyad Mosque. After a brief open space, we reached the covered textile markets where in one *khan* my father's shop was located.

Jeddo darted inside without a word, and headed towards his preferred sitting place, a chair in the customer area lying at the corner formed by the meeting of my father's main desk at the top of the shop and a long bench that separated the customer area from the serving area where my father, his

younger brother and their assistants would fetch rolls of clothing material off the shelves all around the shop walls, and spread a few metres over the bench to show interested customers and convince them of buying. The clothing fabrics were entirely for women, who constituted most of the customers.

Jeddo's choice of the chair was one of convenience. On the one hand, it put him close to where his son, my father, sat when running the administrative affairs of the business. On the other hand, it was easier for him to reach, rather than squeeze himself between the shelves and the service bench to get to the sitting area behind the main desk. His visits to the shop in the afternoon lasted no more than half an hour, after which he would spend two hours in his own shop then return home for the evening meal and prayer, before heading back to the same Medhat Pasha route, but now he would continue to Nassr Street where the café was located next to the Hijaz Railway Station in the heart of the city.

I took my position behind the counter hoping to assist everyone in displaying and selling material, and gain my father's approval to spend my school holidays at the shop effectively. My grandfather's chair was in the awkward position between the bench and a door that led to an inner store. The door had a large mirror that helped women envisage how the material

would look on them. But when the shop got crowded, jeddo would be lost among bargaining men and women. He would usually be oblivious to the crowd, staring at the floor as he ran a rosary between his fingers, supporting his wrist on the knee of his leg that was crossed over the other. Whenever a stretch of cloth was passed over the counter for a lady to throw on her shoulder, he would turn his face away or retreat back in his chair to avoid the material. I always thought that at his age, he lost any interest in women. He was thirty years older than my grandmother, and since I opened my eyes to life I had never seen them or felt that they were in a marriage-like relationship. He had his own room and she hers, but she took full care of him. For his extra daily needs, he used to call on his youngest daughter, auntie Aida, for help. This included asking her to listen to the call for prayer coming from the Umayyad Mosque, because his hearing was no longer good enough. He spent most of his spare time reading the Koran near the fountain in the yard of his home.

His reaction today was not his usual. There was a tender look in his eyes: a look of fondness and appreciation, although it had some features of those looks men give to women in admiration. It felt very artistic. I was so delighted to discern such a trait in jeddo. A quality he himself might not have been conscious of. But it was there and it filled me with joy particularly that our impression of him was of a practical and materialistic nature. He

was the head of the family. We had to pay him respect. He was very predictable, following a routine of sleeping, eating, praying, reading the Koran and frequenting the Café. There, drinking tea, smoking the *argneelab* and playing backgammon were his remaining luxuries in life. Once he was rich, but paradoxically he was not known to like possessions. Aside from the people he met at the café, he had no friends. He never indicated that he had any fondness of the arts, not even of some of the fine objects his family displayed at home. I never heard him describe anything as ‘beautiful’. His words were always about ‘pious’, ‘important’, ‘useful’, ‘useless’ and only one swearing word: ‘shit-eater’. On the surface, he seemed to me a ‘black and white’ person. If the colours were there, he was not the sort of person to flag them—that is if he knew how!

His reaction on that day made me aware at an early age that we probably all have colours, but we differ in the way we express them. Or in the way we show their truthfulness. Or, indeed, some of us would live their lives unable to employ them, let alone being aware of them. It also showed me how to appreciate the beauty of the human body and beyond.

When I looked at the source of his admiration, my surprise diminished. She was a lady in her early thirties, tall, slender, perfect proportions, large black eyes, long black hair that was mostly hidden under a burgundy scarf, and a

dark complexion as if a princess of the desert has just materialized in an elegant western attire of tight black top and skirt. There was an inner glow that seemed pouring all around her. She was irresistible, but I never imagined jeddo having any interest. When I looked carefully to the way in which she spread a stretch of golden silk material over her shoulder and around her waist, covering one breast, I could envisage within the frame of the reflecting door mirror a naked firm body shrouded in gold, with one shoulder and full breast prominently bare and so is the leg on the opposite side of the body, with the knee slightly bent and one side of the pubes showing from underneath the silken rim. I saw a black and yellow painting hanging at *le Louvre*.