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The Pigeon Wars of Damascus

1

Since my last visit there, almost five years ago, I had had several dreams of Damascus. When I dreamed my way back onto the Souq Hamidiye, where I hoped to find Fatina, 'Queen of the Souq', the only woman to work in that male preserve, what I found instead was some crazy Arabic equivalent of a western shopping mall, an open hive of small concrete cubicles. There was a perfumery of some kind where a live model, dolled up to look like Cleopatra, sat motion-less in a chair. 'Where is Fatina?' I asked her. She seemed not to hear me. I repeated my question, but just like a figure in profile on an Egyptian tomb painting, whose eye nobody'll ever catch, she continued to gaze straight past me. A dream or two later, the Umayyad mosque was nowhere visible, and the area behind it, where the Nofara Café used to be, was now entirely demolished and resembled an industrial landscape, the Barada River cutting through it, black as ink, much wider than it is in reality. I had to be careful not to slip into it because I was walking along the top edge of a steep incline of loose pebbles. The city I knew was gone. Worse still, my friends Abed and Sulayman demonstrated no great desire to see me. When finally I did locate them, on some peculiar housing estate, a group of squat, windowless buildings facing onto a communal square paved with concrete, again nothing such as one would find in Damascus or anywhere else, we sat out in the open, picking at a meal in bored silence. This is where those dreams most deeply affected me.

The relationship between Abed and Sulayman was the main subject of my book of travels in Syria, *The Street Philosopher and the Holy Fool*, which I had just seen through proof stage. Only now was I going back to Damascus because, after several disappointments, and also because I suffer from pride, I swore I wouldn't return until I had found a publisher for the book. And then, maybe because I had been locked into a work that took several years to realise, and with which I had made one false start after another, I felt I'd written myself into a corner. The air becomes awfully stale there. I was badly in need of fresh strategies. Also, with so much having occurred in the interim -- a new intifada in Palestine, the destruction of the Twin Towers, the war in Afghanistan and now the ongoing conflict in Iraq -- I wanted to see what had become of the 'street philosopher' and the 'holy fool' of my book's title. Would Damascus speak to me as openly as it had done before?

When I first met him, Abed spoke of life's vicissitudes [*sic*], saying that this was a word he'd picked up from Oscar Wilde. Dostoyevskian in his enquiries into human nature, although Oblomovian in applying such answers as he managed to generate, he soon enlisted me in his quest for a wife. I was to be his counsellor in matters of romance. Now, while I do not wish to claim expertise in this area I might have been bringing snow to the Sahara, for such was the wonderment with which Abed met my scattered flurries of advice. 'These are things my mother never told me!' While I took notes from him, he took notes from me. What I needed to do, however, was to disengage him from his pillow, which he clung onto until at least midday and to which, as the years went by, he would cling more and more. When Abed became engaged to a girl of sixteen called Ghufuran he came to me, with panic in his eyes, saying he had never before kissed a girl. 'I understand there is a problem with oxygen

intake.' The affair with Ghufran was to end in failure, as would all his future romances. Abed, who dedicated himself wholly to adventures of the mind, had nothing much to offer in terms of a secure marital future. While his greatest fear was of becoming a 'mainstreamer', what he wanted was a girl of traditional values, 'pure of mind and body', who had all the mental attributes of a westerner, that is, someone with whom, while she sliced the aubergines, he could discuss Averroes.

Meanwhile, his bosom friend, Sulayman, holy fool and alchemist, moved along a path of asceticism strange to even his fellow Muslims. Such was the love between them, Abed told me, that when he dies amid his putrescence will be found the gold Sulayman's friendship gave him. (Abed couldn't recall whether he invented or stole this line, so we decided to call it a proverb just in case. Abed's good when it comes to poaching lines.) In this life, on the other hand, Sulayman was determined to produce *actual* gold, the making of it being for him, as for all true alchemists, as opposed to puffers, a spiritual exercise. *Omnia in Unum*. When I last saw him, it was at one of his alchemical sessions. Surely I am one of the few to have ever witnessed such a scene. As we watched the temperature on the digital kiln steadily rise, Sulayman, pretending to succumb to the effect of poisonous fumes, performed one of his splendid mines. Over his feigned corpse, Abed explained to me how it had been Sulayman's ambition to dispense with language altogether and to go through life by means of mime alone. A follower of the great mystic and philosopher, Ibn al-'Arabi, Sulayman sought to interpret things according to his own lights, which at times flickered wildly, as if there were some-thing loose in the connection between medium and source. Whatever the particulars, and he was nothing if not unique, Sulayman's holy folly had its roots deep in the country's spiritual history. Sometimes the line between it and the total madness would dissolve almost entirely, not least the year he spent in a cemetery, communing with the newly dead as they were lowered into their graves. Sulayman was what Abed most wanted to become, while, at the same time, Abed prevented Sulayman from flying into space. If, as my dreams portended, I were to lose their friendship, Damascus might just as well be a barren landscape.

A year ago, I discovered the 1936 film, *Pépé le Moko*, and, with something approaching nostalgia for a world that never quite was, I watched it several times. *Casablanca* is not a patch on it, nor is *Sinbad the Sailor*. Jean Gabin plays a charming French gangster, confined to the Casbah in Algiers, where he is shielded from the police. The Casbah is a maze. Only if Pépé leaves it and abandons his Arab mistress, Inès, for a floozy Parisian, Gaby, will they be able to catch him. What does he really pine for, though, the dazzling babe or the City of Light, memories of which she reawakens in him? At one point he speaks to her of his longing for the Métro, when other men might have been thinking along rather different lines. I'm still scratching my brain for an answer because, although I am pretty sure I know what it is, one's education these days does not allow for easy responses. There has always got to be another angle. There's got to be a post-post-*post* view of things. As of late, eyebrows have been raised about the director Julien Duvivier's cultural and political attitudes. Soon there may be questions about mine. The film is shamelessly Orientalist in tone. It wouldn't be the great film it is otherwise. What was there about it, though, that made me ache? Could it be that I pined for what Pépé wants to flee? Was I feeling nostalgic for similarly dark alleyways, strains of Arabic music and an occasional whiff of spices? Maybe, maybe. Certainly in Pépé's shoes, and I would rather it were *in his time*, I'd have gone for the dusky Inès and the Ali Baba Café. Could it be the

film offered the blatant fiction which, when writing my book, I was at such pains to avoid? Was I after a holiday from verisimilitude? I am not given to escapism, however, and prefer the mysteries of the real world to those of celluloid fantasies. One reason the film tickled me so is that the evil it portrays is of a spiritually localised nature, and, no matter how wobbly the premises, the human predicaments as played out in that particular space (which I learned later, to my surprise, was actually a set built in Joinville) felt true. One was dealing with recognisable forms rather than with mere fripperies. The gangster P  p   cares about style; he cares about etiquette; he cares about the French language.

P  p  's world is graspable and somehow delicious, witty and attractive, and it reminded me of Damascus as I first experienced it, when, as in an old movie, I really did enter a play of light and dark. Strange that my recent experiences of Damascus should be infused with memories, a decade old, of my first visit there. I had only just arrived when a petty crook called Eli said to me, 'Would you like to know the Arabic for *chicken and rice*?' I fell for his line, and twenty-four hours later was relieved of my purse. The irony of it all, and I am thinking here of my friends having warned me against going to such a 'dangerous' place, is that, technically speaking, Eli was an American, a New Yorker of Syrian descent. I should have been able to judge him by his doubtful name and his silk flowered shirt, the buttons of which were half undone, but then he looked too much like a crook to possibly be one. 'Say, you speak good English for an Englishman,' he said in impeccable Brooklynese, and I had no wish to disabuse him of the notion. Eli had cinematic sparkle.

'So who was the chick in the mosque?' he asked me the following evening. Yes, there was an In  s in my movie too, who jokingly said she'd join my harem. A man called Jamal, who offered to show me the sites for free, introduced me to her inside the Umayyad mosque. She joined us on a trip to the military museum where she fired imaginary bullets at the wreckage of an Israeli plane. She said her name was Carmen, which I believed at the time. When I mentioned Queen Zenobia, she replied, 'Our Maggie Thatcher!' She then disappeared from the plot altogether, such that I could never figure out how she entered it in the first place. Jamal later took me to a brothel ('a very special surprise') from where I had to make an escape. 'Do you not like Syrian women?' he cried. I told him I did, which was why I had no time for his whores. Jamal pursued me with a pocket calculator, telling me what I owed him for the day's expenses. I gave him nothing. When I got back to my hotel, Eli beamed with approval. 'You mean *you* conned *him*?' he said, with something approaching feminine tenderness in his voice, 'Oh no, man, that's really, really beautiful.' All the other elements of this story are absurdly true, more so than I care to relate in a single serving of prose, and this was *before* I made the error of thinking I could write a book about a country and its people.

It would be another year before I'd find my focus in particulars as opposed to generalities. Still, with that authorial struggle now firmly behind me, there was something in that film which just wouldn't quit me. It took me back to a more innocent time, not that such times can be said to exist; or, if they do, they are merely silk-wrapped lulls in an endless cycle of violence. I should say rather that in it, in that mythical place, one could entertain certain assumptions about human nature. Whatever could have got into the world's crawl that the relentless pursuit of reality, always in the most trashy of modes, 'reality TV', for example, should have rendered

the most basic truths false? When's reality not reality but a city made of papier mâché? My alchemist friend told me the new millennium, when it came, might provide a cure. What would he say now, now that the gold he dreamed he could make had become a hideous alloy of broken glass, steel girders and human blood? Small wonder Pépé's Casbah seems a finer place.

The Queen of the Souq, I am happy to report, is where she always was, with her Marlboros and several packs in reserve, her arthritis, a single braid running down the middle of her back, her owlish glasses and the pigeon's coo which is her tender voice. She, who in our hemisphere would be single, is a spinster in hers. The shop is the closest thing she has to a marriage. She barely strays from the road that takes her there and back home again. When I last saw her a bad storm had rendered one wall of her house unstable. She fixed her house just in time. A bigger storm was yet to come. This year an increasingly unstable Middle East had been bad for trade, but despite this, despite the big economic squeeze, Fatina remained for me a kind of assurance. Whatever the world's turmoil, and the cowardly American bombing of Fallujah was only the latest in a deadly cycle, Fatina's smile temporarily removed all such stains from the mind. The shop was our shelter against dark forces. We stuck mainly to local themes. I'd speak to her of areas of Old Damascus she claimed she had never been to, which are only minutes away, although I wonder if she wasn't teasing me a little.

There is a great sadness in her life, which is not for these pages. I say this only because she herself was amazed she told me of it. We were sitting in what was the courtyard of a great Ottoman house once, which is now an excellent restaurant, and which would have been mood-perfect were it not for the movie that was suddenly, and at nobody's behest, projected against one of the black-and-white stone walls. When I protested, the waiter laughed. After all, he said, this was freedom. The movie, milky with light from other sources, was *The Bodyguard* with Kevin Costner and somehow his squeaky voice grated all the more against stone. And then, just as Fatina got to the crux of her tragedy, there was a car chase with much gunfire and squealing of tyres. But then, perhaps, it was easier for her to unburden herself while my attention was forced elsewhere. The pity of it was that I had to ask her to repeat what was difficult enough for her to say in the first place. We drank a mint julep, without alcohol, of course, which nevertheless was unsurpassable. The fresh mint was so finely ground one could not see any swimming particles. The lemon and sugar were perfectly in balance. The ice was crushed, but not so crushed that it became mush; it was more like rock crystals in liquid emerald. 'How's it made?' asked Fatina. The waiter, although he gave us the ingredients, would reveal neither the method nor the measures.

One must listen carefully to Fatina because although she speaks English with perfect confidence, and at great speed, what comes out is a bit of a jumble sometimes. She is worth all the power of one's concentration. She has stories to relate, some of them rather fine, such as the one she told me about an Austrian UN soldier, stationed in the Golan Heights, who came to Damascus on weekend leave. 'Can you tell me where the action is?' he asked her. 'What you do mean, *action*?', she replied. 'Well, like, you know, *girls*.' Fatina said, 'Ah yes, of course! What you do is go downstairs, turn right, away from the Souq Hamidiye, and then turn left where, at the end of the street, you'll see a blue door. Go through that blue door and you will find all the action you like.' A few minutes later, the Austrian returned in a crimson rage, saying, 'So what's the big

idea, sending me to the public toilets?' Fatina replied, 'Oh, I thought you might find yourself there!'

I did visit those toilets once.

(to be continued)