

The Spice Man

by Lesley Dawson

I am beginning to get used to life here. It helps that I am studying at university again. It is quite comforting to be among like-minded people from all over the world, all of us living in student accommodation. I am fortunate that my roommate - an American from California, has lived in the Middle East. Her father taught politics at the American University in Beirut, and she attended an international school there.

She has taught me to like American fast food. We regularly eat burgers at McDonalds and chicken cooked the Kentucky Fried Chicken way. They didn't taste like real food at first, but it is quickly made and served and that allows us to get lunch between classes.

They don't taste like the food my mother made in Bethlehem, nor do they smell the same. Everything has a fried smell mixed with the ripe tomato smell of ketchup. I never thought I would enjoy this food, but needs must.

I still miss the smell of freshly brewed Arabic coffee in the early morning, encouraging me to get up and get ready for school. My father always made the morning coffee before he left to walk to the checkpoint and queue for a *service* to Jerusalem. This instant coffee here is stale and insipid by comparison but at least it does have some kick and wakes me up enough to struggle into the shower and get myself ready for another round of lectures.

As we queued up to access the drinks machine, Dorrie had a bright idea for our one afternoon off in a month,

"Let's go into town and wander around the Farmers Market. It will be more fun than listening to everybody moan and groan about the upcoming midterm exams."

I agreed without thinking too much about it and agreed to meet up after our last class of the morning.

I seemed to float through the morning without paying much attention to anything or anybody and was so distant that my favourite tutor told me to come out of my dream as there was work to be done.

Coming up from the subway I thought I caught some familiar smells. No, I must be imagining it. It couldn't be Arabic coffee. The smell grew stronger as we walked round the different shops that seemed to be selling everything you could want.

"Dorrie. Am I imagining it, or can you smell Arabic coffee?" she duly turned around and surveyed the lines of stalls.

"Yes. I can smell something. Let's head over to that corner, over there."

Coming into view was a stall piled high with different coloured spices, as well as my Arabic coffee. As I inhaled the aromas, of thyme, oregano, marjoram and sumac I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I could taste the citrus taste, mingled with a slight bitterness and some sweetness that made me think of za'ater.

I closed my eyes and imagined walking through the *suk* in Bethlehem with my mother. I could see her running her fingers through the sumac and the exploding smell on the air and the tongue. I could see us walking home discussing recipes and deciding how we would use the za'ater.

At that moment I missed her so much, I couldn't move. My eyes filled with tears and my heart was broken. Dorrie, must have sensed my mood as she chattered away to the man in the woolly hat and the big blue muffler who was looking at me in surprise.

"Are you ok, miss?"

When he received no reply, Dorrie, stepped in to explain that my imagination and emotions were thousands of miles away. He nodded and smiled sadly as he explained how his mother and father had left his home in Jerusalem many years ago.

Taking heart from his concern and compassion for another lost soul from the Middle East, I found myself describing the day when Israeli soldiers had tear gassed a student demonstration in Manger Square. Clutching our cut onions to reduce the effects of the gas and holding scarfs and handkerchiefs over our noses, we ran up through the *suk*, past the Syrian Orthodox Church, up the steps and slid past the Lutheran Peace Centre to scramble up through the university car park and into the campus. Somebody clanged the heavy doors together to close the entrance, and we sat down to recover ourselves.

Usually, the soldiers did not pursue us to the university, but this time they did and the tear gas cylinders were lobbed over the walls. We all tried to retreat into the admin office, but we were too many. Our second bolt hole was always the library, despite the disapproval of the Philippino sister in charge. We were incarcerated in the university for twenty-four hours and when we finally got home, we found parents who were convinced we had been arrested and taken away to administrative detention.

That was the final straw for my father, he decided to send me to his cousin in New York and visas, and plane tickets were duly obtained with all the usual difficulties. My parents could not get permission to escort me to Ben Gurion airport, so I tagged on to a group of tutors who were attending a conference in Boston.

I had not thought about these things for months. In fact I had probably suppressed such thoughts. They had all come into the light because of the smell of spices and the imagined taste of za'ater. My friendly spice man, who told us his name was Issa, apologized for causing me such hurt, but I shook my head and smiled in relief that I had remembered so much that I needed not to forget.

As we walked back to our dormitory, arm in arm, Dorrie remembered a quote from one of her set books, "Smell, like music, hold memories. She breathed deep and bottled it up for posterity."

I did just that and found it helped me to remember my past without shame or regret.