

Judith Gets Her Just Desserts Syria, April 2011



It was past ten p.m. The shop in the souk where we got our decadent vanilla ice cream cones slathered with chopped pistachios would be closed. Our route back through the Old City of Damascus took us past our favourite pastry shop with its shelves loaded with outrageously naughty honey and nut confections, but this was closed, too.

Not far from our hotel a group of men lounged about in the alley. They wore traditional costumes and carried musical instruments. Hypnotic Arabic music drifted from a passageway. Judith investigated and I trailed reluctantly behind her. We had to stoop through the low arch. More men hung about in the passageway, smoking and chatting. They stood aside to let us pass. We were greeted with smiles and urged along the twisting tunnel towards the music.

Insistent gentle pressure on our backs pushed us into a courtyard, where a dervish was spinning a circular cloak above his head. This and the skirt he wore were studded with hundreds of electric fairy lights. I winced. We had been lured into some kind of tourist trap night club.

Our captors propelled us across the floor under the whirling cloak of the dervish. A smiling man got up and gave his front row seat to Judith, and the man next to him cradling an infant in his arms insisted on giving me his seat. I thought, this doesn't happen in night clubs.

Beneath a sprawling lemon tree, the open space was filled with a hundred or so men and boys sitting on plastic chairs or standing against the walls. Judith was the only woman in the place. The music came from a choir of twenty seated men, all wearing suits and identical striped ties, chanting metronomically to a pulsating drum beat. Over this stalwart backing group a young Pavarotti wove anguished, haunting refrains in the manner of a flamenco *cante jondo* singer.

The dervish somehow puffed out his skirt so that with the cloak spinning above, he took on the glittering shape of an hourglass of ever-changing colours. Men got up to prance under the shelter of his whirling parabola. When he left, a little old man rose from his seat and did a dashing impromptu whirl of his own.

All of the entertainment was interactive. When a troupe of costumed men entered flaunting handkerchiefs in a stately traditional dance, amateurs rose from the audience to join their circle. Alarming, some young men stood up on their chairs to flourish swords around their heads in frantic patterns.

The chanting and plaintive singing to the monotonous drum beat continued without pause. We were not stared at or even recognised, except that from time to time someone would approach us for the ritual Syrian greeting.

“Where are you from?”

“England”

“Welcome.”

A burly man came out to swallow fire and swords and crunch a fluorescent tube with his teeth. He offered a shard to Judith. She declined, which was just as well because there was better fare to come. Men appeared with trays holding cups containing three flavours of ice cream.

By this time we had puzzled out what the party was all about. A dapper, portly young man in a black suit sat near the lead singer. From time to time someone would approach him, cheeks would be kissed and respects paid. As his well-wisher left the young man would press into his hand a small gift in gaudy green, orange or blue tissue.

When the crowd began to thin and we made our way towards the exit we were each given a gift bag as well. I have never in my lifetime seen so many men having such a great time without a drop to drink. We had crashed a Damascus bachelor party. And in addition to the three scoops of ice cream we had each enjoyed, the gift bag contained candied almonds. So Judith got her just desserts.

The next morning we looked for that low arch leading off the alley and could not find it. Did it all really happen?

