



THROUGH THE  
**VEIL**

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## CHAPTER 1

# DAMASCUS DREAMS

In dreams I walk the winding labyrinth of the Old City. I push through crowds in the bazaar. Daylight filters through cracks and holes in the covered ceiling, like stars piercing the dome of the night sky. Crumbling columns testify that the Roman Empire reached this far. I walk deep into the Old City, and I know where to turn right or left through ancient corridors without numbers or markings. I have no map in my dreams, as I had no map when I walked the streets and lanes of Damascus. I asked my way until I'd memorized the route home by walking it daily, the paths and steps and turnings all soaked into my mind, etched into memory after many tracings.

I speak Arabic in my dreams. When I wake and repeat the words, I laugh at the nonsense that seemed like poetry to my dreaming mind. Other times I am amazed that a dream has resurrected the perfect conjugation of a verb long forgotten. Old friends appear, hands waving as I pass homes, beckoning from open doorways where the smell of a midday meal welcomes. It's all here someplace deep in my memory. Damascus is a part of me.

The streets of ancient Damascus have not changed since I lived there in 1990. They have changed very little

over hundreds and thousands of years. The old man who sat on a three-legged stool at the end of our lane—he's gone now. Perhaps his grandson is still there, locking up a shop door and returning to the family home to greet his wife and new son. I would not recognize them. I do not know Damascus as the Damascene. I know it as a foreigner, a wayfarer, one passing through. In deep dreams I remember. When I wake, hours before sunrise, I shake off sleep and I write.

I write the Damascus I love, but sometimes her face blurs and I can't make out details: both dreams and memories are tangled things. They twist themselves around smells and feelings and other memories of times and people far removed. They tumble to the page like a child at play, breathing hard. I calm and comb them, working out the catches and finding the story enmeshed in strands of memory. I write and rewrite, but some memories remain confused and tangled. I work the others, braiding them and tying the ends with reflection and sometimes also tying them with regret.

## CHAPTER 2

# ALIEN LAND

It woke me from my jet-lagged sleep, it was so loud. I rolled out of bed in the dark and stumbled to the window. Before leaving the U.S. I'd heard a recording of the Call to Prayer. It sounded exotic—distant and haunting. But in real life the Call to Prayer blasted in as if no windows or walls sheltered me. It drove sleep away and made me want to plug my ears. It demanded. I was dragged from my dreams into an alien land on the first morning of my first day in the Middle East.

Under the streetlight outside two men grabbed prayer rugs from the trunk of a taxi and rolled them out, facing away from me. They bowed, knelt, and stood again, touching ears and heart as they made their early morning prayer. The Call to Prayer echoed and faded. The men put their prayer rugs away and lit up cigarettes.

“I could be on Mars,” I thought. “And I’m going to live here.”

The men finished their cigarettes, got into the taxi, and drove away. The parking lot stretched out, large and empty like the surrounding desert.

On the flight from Amsterdam to Amman I'd slept a dizzy sleep, dreaming of bright mosques in red and orange

and green and homes with domed roofs painted in magic-carpet designs. But now in the dim light, everything around me was sand colored and flat roofed—blocks drawn up out of the desert to make a city. The only color was the King Abdullah mosque up on the hill, with its three rotundas of swimming-pool blue.

It was 1990 and I was part of an ethnographic research team. We'd flown into Amman, Jordan, and were spending the night there. In the morning we would take the bus a few hours north, across the Syrian border and up to Damascus, where we would live for three months.

It took weeks before I learned to sleep through the Call to Prayer. Every morning the call went out—and then four more times throughout the day.

*Allahu akbar.*

God is great.

There is no God but God,  
and Mohammed is his prophet.

Come and pray.

Prayer is better than sleep.



## CHAPTER 3

# THE LOOM

Like a spy I followed them, now pausing to empty an imaginary stone from my shoe, now asking a shop owner the price of a bracelet, all the time watching and waiting for an opportunity.

She wore a billowing Persian *chador*: a length of fabric wrapped around her body, encircling her face. She gripped the chador beneath her chin with one hand as she walked a few steps behind the man I assumed was her husband. Her gaze never drifted beyond his back, as if she were confined by an invisible perimeter that isolated her from the world she moved through. She would have noticed me had she looked. I stood out in Damascus even when I covered my own blonde head.

Back home in Oregon I'd been one student of many bundling across campus, heads down in the rain. I didn't stand out in those crowds, and I knew what to expect from the world around me. I recognized the smell of the first cold wind in late fall. I knew the frozen-wet feel of the heavy sky that portended snow.

I'd worked with international students on my campus—Japanese, Arabs, and others. Perhaps those college days foreshadowed the turned-around future, when I would be

the foreigner in a strange land. I'd thought myself outgoing when I enrolled in a study tour and came to Damascus. It wasn't so easy, as the foreigner, to be the first to say hello.

I stood so near the woman that I could smell her rose-scented perfume. I heard a cloth merchant in his open stall attempt English and then French with the husband. Because she wore the chador I knew, as the shop owner must have, that this man and this woman were not from Syria. They were Persian, from Iran. They spoke Farsi and not Arabic.

A classmate had noticed that there were more women in chadors near certain mosques in Damascus. One or two focused interviews would give us enough answers to write a brief ethnography on this group for our report. Since I was the outgoing one, I'd been assigned to make contact with one of these women and to bring back answers to the questions jotted in my memo pad. My classmates thought that it would be easy for me. And I suppose it would have been easy, back home. I longed for the Oregon rain to blur the faces around me. In that familiar rain, I would know how to find my destination. With my head down, I would follow the paved walkways across the campus quad.

The man entered a shop and his wife followed. I slipped in as the female clerk greeted them with words I didn't recognize from my Arabic class.

Later that day I would wish I had listened more closely to the greeting in Farsi.

They were interested in a woven rug. They spread it out over the shop's pile of folded weavings. The man stood back to eye the rug while the woman reached out to it, running her fingers across the pattern as if to feel for irregularities. I knew that I should step closer, perhaps feign interest in one of the smaller rugs. But how would I ask

questions of this woman if she spoke no English? Her husband grunted a syllable, and her hand dropped from the weaving. Then he exited the shop and she followed without a single glance outside her bubble.



The shopkeeper behind the counter tapped her fingers on the glass countertop.

*“Privyet,”* she said.

I stared at her, trying to fit the word into a variation of the Arabic greetings I knew.

“Do you, umm, speak English?” I asked.

“Of course. Welcome in Syria.” She smiled. “Austrian? G’day, mate.”

“I’m from America.”

“America? Ah, no wonder you didn’t understand.”

Through the store window I saw the Iranian couple take their shoes off at the door to the mosque and disappear inside. I could still go after them. It wasn’t too late.

“Did you want to buy a postcard?” she asked me. “I don’t have any with Iranian women on them.” She winked.

I felt like a comic character in a black and white movie, doing a double take. Wasn’t winking an American convention? How did she know?

“My name is Sanaa,” she said. “Welcome in Damascus.”

This was the hardest part for me. Jumping from friendly tourist to nosy student researcher. It was one thing to make friends. Quite another to get down to business with the ethnographic interview.

“May I ask? That woman—is she Iranian?”

“I have many customers from Iran,” Sanaa said. “I greet them in Farsi. To help them feel at home. Some of the

Iranian families rent homes in my neighborhood. I know them very well.”

It was easier than I'd thought.

“My customers come from every country, and I greet each of them in their own language.” Sanaa pulled two chairs together behind the counter. “Come, rest here with me.”

I hesitated, not sure whether I was avoiding my research goals or meeting them. But I wanted to sit with Sanaa. She reminded me of my days working with international students. Just as Sanaa had learned to greet her customers in their own language, I had a goal for myself—in that other life, back in Oregon—to learn a phrase or two in the language of each of my students.

I drew my mind back to the day's research topic.

“You say some of your neighbors are from Iran? Why do they live in Damascus?”

She took a thermos and small handleless cup from under the counter.

“Real Arabic coffee. From the Bedouin. It's the best.”

Sanaa poured a splash of dark coffee into a traditional Arabic coffee cup—more a small bowl than a cup. The bitter coffee tasted unpleasant, but I drank.

“A small sip is enough,” she said. “Then rock the cup like this, and you have thanked your host.” I waggled the cup; she took it from me, sipping and waggling for herself before setting the cup down behind the counter.

“There,” she said. “That's the Bedouin way to make friends.”

Her lightly accented English was grammatically perfect. Why didn't she answer my questions? Again I asked her about the Iranians living in Damascus. I piled up the questions: how many and why and whether they stayed for months or years.

Sanaa reached for a stack of photos tucked under the cash box behind the counter.

“These are the Bedouin women who make our rugs,” she told me. What was the connection between these photos and my question? Perhaps another day I’d be assigned to research the Bedouin, and I would wish for an opportunity like this. Sanaa held the stack of photos out, and I took them from her.

The first photo showed two women sitting cross-legged around a tray, drinking from handleless cups. In another photo, one of the women held a calculator.

The next was a close-up of the loom under wrinkled hands. Blue and rusty orange yarn stretched lengthwise for maybe two yards, waiting for the cross-threads that would set a design in the work and make it a rug instead of a length of wool threads. When Sanaa gestured to the finished rugs at the back of the store, I thought of the Iranian woman. What would I have done if she had turned around, looked straight into my eyes, and spoken to me in a language I didn’t understand?



Later that day I stood waiting at the bus station. Beside me a thin man smoked with quick puffs, tapping ashes onto the ground. Soon the bus would arrive and the crowd around us would start pushing. I moved, positioning myself away from the burning cigarette.

As the bus pulled in I felt hands on my upper back, but already the crowd compressed so I couldn’t turn around and see who touched me. The hands stayed my back, propelling me through the crowd. I fell to my knees on the bus stairs, and the hands lifted me to my feet, still pressing me

forward, over the threshold and onto the bus. I stepped over a glowing cigarette butt in the aisle and looked for an empty spot.

I sat next to a woman who was turned to look out the window, a length of floral fabric flowing over the back of her head. Her bright chador was different from any I'd seen in Damascus.

The bus rolled out of the lot, lurching until we were on the main road. My seatmate swayed then steadied, still looking out the window, her back to me. The pattern on her chador was woven, not printed. At her shoulders, black threads seemed to break free of the design and poke right through the weave. The threads were her hair. They blended with the pattern in the fabric, except that the hairs poking through looked stiff compared to the soft drape of the chador as its fabric flowed down the back of her head, over her shoulders, to the seat.

She turned to me and I became part of her enclosed world. Her eyes wrinkled around the sides, and she lowered the fabric to reveal a smile. Around her face wisps of black hair slipped out from the chador, thick like her eyelashes. She spoke in Farsi—too quickly for me to parrot the words. I responded in Arabic. She smiled, shook her head and touched my hand, speaking again in Farsi. I answered in English this time. Again she shook her head and spoke, very quietly, with tentative, choppy words.

*“Konichi-wa.”*

The words hung for a moment, vaguely familiar. Then somewhere out of the Iranian woman's past and mine, an old thread emerged and twisted into the weave.

*“Konichi-wa,”* I said.

Words I'd memorized to welcome my Japanese students now connected me with this woman from Iran. In Japanese,

she asked me how I was and learned that I was fine. Already running out of phrases, I mentioned several menu items from my favorite Japanese restaurant back home. She countered by naming the islands of Japan. Then she smiled and tucked loose threads into the hem of her chador, while I wondered why she had Japanese words to offer.

In Bedouin carpets like the ones Sanaa showed me, there are no loose threads. Even while the carpet is being formed in long strands of wool on the loom, each thread is connected, stretching out as a single, not yet complete, piece of work. Looking out the bus window, over the floral shoulder of the Iranian woman, I imagined a long woven carpet unrolling just ahead of me, through Old City corridors and down busy Damascus streets.

She got off the bus before I did and joined two black-robed women who exited from the rear door and met her on the curb. By the time the bus came to my stop, near the end of the route, there were few passengers left. I climbed the steps from the street into the Old City, just a few lanes away from home.

Along one narrow corridor, a woman swept dust and pebbles out of her front door so they scattered to the corners of the lane. I looked past her into the open courtyard of her home. All along the edge of the inner balcony hung carpets, blue and orange and gold, airing in the sun while she cleaned her floors. They were in the same colors as the Bedouin rugs in Sanaa's shop, the same colors as the rugs in the snapshots. Was there connection here, too? I imagined an invisible thread, like the long warp on a loom, connecting past to future and woman to woman. She stopped sweeping and smiled, gesturing an invitation for me to come into her home. Perhaps there would be no common threads at all, just an awkward cup of tea and a wasted

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hour. But I wouldn't know unless I tested the strength of the line.

“Welcome,” she said. “Welcome in Syria.”

I stepped through the door and into the inner courtyard.