

Jido Saad Al Bitar

By Dana Dajani

His earlobes are long. Maybe the longest I've ever seen. they wobble to and fro.

His thin, white mustache is always trimmed neatly on top of slim lips that naturally curve into a smile.

His nose is like an ancient temple. Large, and old, and gaping.

His eyes are more gentle than the summer breeze that keeps Amman from burning up in the desert heat. They twinkle zai il Zamar.

His once black hair, now glides in white-gray waves along his head, parted politely on the left, the same way he has worn his hair for the past 70 years.

His skin is smooth and soft and thick, and hangs like a velvet curtain over his dull cheekbones.

One of my sweetest childhood memories is of dappled light from between green leaves that grew above the car park of my grandparent's house. And me atop of Gido's shoulders picking pears, teen, mish mish, 3nab and any other delicacy grown in his garden. We'd proudly parade the plate of produce into the kitchen, rinsing the ripe bounty and biting into its swollen, fresh flesh, victorious.

When he plays cards with his friends at the Club next door, Nadi Sayarat, or as my sister once explained to her American friend, "it's an automobile club but literally translated to calling all cars"... Gido will occasionally wear a grey suit and a powdery shirt. I have never seen him wear jeans.

He regularly dons a white dish-dash and slippers, and over it an ornate abaya. The same one I hid behind 15 years ago when we played tricks on his daughters, "wein Dana? Into shayfeenha? Mu shayfha min zaman..." he would innocently ask his children, as I clutched his dish-dash and scooted behind him, careful not to rustle his abaya. Only after my mother and her sisters turned the house upside down, would I fly out from underneath his robes, pissing everyone the hell off. It never failed to amuse us.

How old this man is, no one knows. His military ID says that he is 93, but he can tell you that he lied about his age in attempts to spare himself from military duty, although he cannot tell you his real age, because he forgot.

He only managed to buy himself a few years from the army, and after a lengthy and honorable service, he made a career of being the late King Hussein's Dentist and Maxillofacial surgeon. He has always had a sweet tooth.

I am 7 and it's summer again, we steal away to the room in which he sleeps-- at night he surrenders the master bedroom to Teta who can not bear his snoring-- Gido quietly closes the door and we giggle in secrecy. He opens his hand to reveal the booty-- two opaque sugar rocks. We each take one and savor the forbidden sweetness, knowing full well we could never let our secret ruin dinner.

I loved that sacred ritual. I lived abroad you see, and only had the chance to return to Amman during those sticky, sugary seifiyehs. I powered through the year for the day that I would hear the clashing of dice on the tawla table, my grandmother proclaiming "sheish beish" as

she slid the checkers down the board like some sort of gypsy spell. I still don't know how to play.

With Hiba, Saad proudly fathered 8 girls-- Nazik, Amal, Sahar, Samar, Mona, Maha, Hanan, and Rabab (my mom) and 1 boy-- Hakam. He is the grandfather of 21. He is the great grandfather of 14. Mashallah His living room is full of framed photographs of his family. On Fridays he orders large trays of sfiha and sits back as the members of his large family pass in and out of his home-- their home. It is always a party in our home.

One year I came home to find the garden gone, paved over in the white-wash stone that Amman is known for. I stood next to the wall of ivy, the only greenery still around, and gawked in horrified confusion. I still haven't forgiven him for that heinous betrayal.

His wife, his children, their spouses, and their children almost ALL smoke. I remember asking Gido how he could stand kissing Teta. He told me it was love. After being away for two years, I entered their veranda only to find Gido with a cigarette caught between his fingers, "Shu 3am ta3mil?" I implored my one and only anti-smoking ally, glaring at the lit cigarette in his hand like the barrel of a smoking gun he just fired into my heart.

"bas 7abeit ajarbo.. shu?"

"eh! bala falsafeh?" I scolded my 3/4 of a century year old grandfather, smashing the cigarette out in the nearest ashtray. "I hope you feel good about yourself."

He just squeezed my 10-year-old shoulder and smiled.

During her life, he also tolerated Teta Hiba's pity for the neighborhood cats, and laughed at her feeble attempts to feed them all

with her scraps. But she persisted for over 35 years. 12 years after her death, he loves the strays that inhabit his boiler room. After dinner every evening he collects a plate of bones and leaves it outside the back door in her tradition.

He tells my sister, who was named after my grandmother, that she is his favorite grandchild because he gets to say his wife's name again. He tells her that the first thing he says every morning is "*saba7 il khair Heba, ba7ibik o mshta2 illik.*"

He is often swept up by the years. He is sometimes blown over by his family. They don't always give him the respect his age deserves. They forget how long he has been alive, what he has seen. Two years ago, he wanted to fix an old watch-- a gift from his late wife, but his driver refused to take him anywhere but the Nadi next door. Aunty Bolbol received a phonecall later that afternoon inquiring as to why her father was attempting to cross a major highway during rush hour traffic.

Although his short term memory is gone, and he has lost much his vision now, he is still a sharp man and I find that his kindness is inherent to his very core. I am leaving Amman, after not having seen him in 5 years, Gido insists on accompanying me to the airport-- a tediously long trip, especially in the arid heat. I hold his hand the whole way. I love him like something I have lost.

He still smells like sugar and shaving cream.