Café Damascus

Nicky Torode

"Just one? They're so tiny," the waitress smiles, confused. "We usually serve baklava in threes. But I check. I'm new here," she shrugs.

"From Syria?" I ask, guessing she isn't.

"No, Ukraine."

My eyebrows arch, my heart crumbles. Seems voyeuristic to strike up small talk. She must be fed up of explaining.

She approaches, pulling a small notepad from her apron. "I like work here in this Syrian café," she says, voice bright.

"And your family?" I say, sotto voce. Losing Hari, my partner, to cancer last month has shrunk my voice, my world.

"Papa had to stay, to fight." She bites her lip. "He's half Russian," her eyes look down, cheeks flush. "Mama, she's too old for a long journey."

I'm close to tears.

She turns and, in seconds, comes back, holding high a plate like she's doing silver service. As if, for now, the world is just this sunny autumn day in Café Damascus, West Norwood.

She sets the plate down. A trio of golden, plump, flaky rhomboids, like three kings of the Orient, huddle in the centre of the plate. Baklava. Baklava! I love mouthing the word. Three kings with crowns of crushed, lime-bright pistachio, paddle in the glistening, satin ribbon of honey. Powdered sugar dusts the plate like snow-capped earth. A tiny, three-pronged fork glints on the side, impatiently.

The manager, from Syria, comes over. I ask for two forks. When she returns, I invite them to eat the baklava with me.

Our forks plunge in, making that satisfying crackle, like trumpets marking the start of the ball.

Crunch.

All my cousins were sent to war.

Crunch.

In Syria brothers are killing brothers.

Crunch.

Dying young. Needless.

We chew in silence.

The radio's no longer playing Kiss FM. Instead, energetic violins, sitars and bells, try to coax us, like snake charmers, into the rhythms of life—a life saying: still there's joy.

The music gets louder as if shooing away the bad spirits. The smell of rose water and semolina perfume the air. I see twirling, sparkly tassels that jiggle, whip and swirl on three dancers' hips. A chorus of "olas" cry out to the beat. The melty filo, the silky honey and sharp nibs of nuts coat my tongue. We smile.

In this moment the baklava makes my world bigger. It feels like I'm scooped onto a magic carpet, a fabric of passion fruit reds, syrupy golds, and fig browns, flying, smiling. Sweet, warm, filling. Grateful now. Hari, he's freed from pain. At rest.

Forks down, we dab our lips with crisp white napkins. I lick my finger to pick up the last crumbs, surprised how my appetite has returned.

We nod, keep nodding, smiles curling. Joy, a tiny act of joy. I hear Kiss FM again.

I leave a generous tip, call out goodbye. My voice vibrates, warm and strong. I walk into the sunshine and smile as the 468 pulls up to take me home.



Nicky Torode is a writer of short, fiction and nonfiction, living in Hastings on the south coast of England. She loves writing about food, place and belonging. She grew up on Guernsey in the Channel Islands and spent over 10 years working overseas. She is a coach and journaling facilitator.