



Source: Sami Moubayed, [‘Turkey determined to turn the screws’](#), *Asia Times online*, 30/10/07.

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The two big events in Kara's life had been her wedding, and the birth of her daughter. At her wedding, she had worn blue, and had sworn a sort of impossible, eternal love. At the birth of her daughter, she'd lain naked, and swore the same sort of devotion, the same sort of love that did not end when she felt tired, did not loosen when she felt sick, did not relax when she felt she could not live like this anymore. These two people, her husband and her now grown-up girl, were the big things, the things that anchored her, kept her, owned her. She was bound to them, bound herself to them and them to her.

But not here. Not Damascus, where she was alone and the men spoke loudly in the street, bargaining, trading, laughing. Not in this old city, where the people blithely walked past baskets of saffron threads and Roman columns, where they went to their mosques to pray, to play, to rest from the heat of the day, their stomachs shrunken from the Ramadan fast.

Here she was not bound. She didn't like it at first, this free-floating feeling. She was without roots, without demands or questions or tokens of love or affectionate kisses. Without it all, she felt naked, exposed. The men's voices in the streets, they were rough and she didn't understand the language. And the women, they didn't smile under their veils, they did not take her in as another woman, did not seem to be like her.

But walking through the old city in the heat, making way for the young boys and men hauling wares to the souq; looking up at the Ottoman tiles and down at the roads walked over for so long; finding the Church that made St Paul a Christian; smelling charred eggplant and lamb and beans in the evening as the sun went down and the feast began, she unwound and unbound. She became part of this city.

Walking along one of these roads, her map out, trying to orientate herself once more with the sun, she found what she'd been (shyly, secretly) looking for: a green-blue curtain, roughly woven, roughly put up, over what seemed nothing more than a hole in the wall. A large man standing outside, looking at her, not knowing if he should approach or not (she saw this time and time again, the Damascus men, seeing a pale woman alone, her skin showing her age, did not know quite what to do with her.) She felt uncertain, scared. What if she were wrong? What if this wasn't the place? She wandered down the street, and up again, and saw a young Muslim woman, shopping in one hand, holding a child on her hip. Her pace was hurried, harried. She looked hot, and the little boy on her hip uncomfortable and heavy. As she passed in through the curtain, the relief on her face was palpable. Kara felt the calm of her disappearing body.

'Hamam?' Kara asked the man.

He nodded. Held open the curtain, careful not to look in.

'How much?'

He simply shrugged. She had to go in.

She went down the stairs, into an empty room. She saw towels, wooden clogs, neat piles of clothes put away. She stood, confused, ready to turn back. And then the woman came, wearing flesh coloured bloomers and clogs, her breasts bare.

'Hamam?'

Another nod. Kara showed her money and the woman picked out 200 Syrian pounds, about five Australian dollars. She motioned to Kara to get undressed, pointed to a doorway, and then left. And Kara did what she was told, put on some clogs lying in the pile, and walked slowly, unsurely through the entrance to the bath.

There was the young Muslim woman, scrubbing her child. There was another, fat, breasts heavy, scrubbing her feet with a pumice stone as she sat next to her basin of hot water.

Kara stood and looked, until she was gently pushed to a basin of her own, and shown, without any common language, with words that meant nothing to her, how she was to scoop the steaming water from the basin and pour it over her head, letting it drip down her body. Again and again.

Small children, dark and fine, played together as their mothers talked, laughing, gossiping. Those women that Kara had seen, silent and veiled, here splashed water on each other, playing, teasing, unclothed.

An old woman came to Kara, showing her that she must now lie on the stone floor. It felt cool against her skin even as the steam travelled through the room. The woman held Kara's limbs aloft, one by one, and washed and kneaded Kara's body. She scrubbed Kara's back and turned her round to scrub her breasts, her stomach. Kara lay and was scrubbed and she cried. She cried because it felt like something she hadn't felt for such a long time. It felt the way a mother scrubs a child.

A mother scrubs her child efficiently, sometimes roughly and tenderly all at once. She does not bother with the child's sense of privacy, she scrubs crevices and genitals and tender places, and she does it over and over again until her child emerges, clean and bright and shining. And that is what happened to Kara.

The woman asked her to sit down on the bench as she washed her hair with one of the great big square blocks of olive oil soap. She spoke to other women as she washed, sang a song to the little children around her. She was distracted, but washed and washed Kara's hair and Kara kept her head bowed as the water splashed down her head and spine and breasts and legs.

Finally she was allowed to rise and dress. She paid a tip, walked away, ready for sleep, bound up in this city, clean, and free.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.*