

Orchestral Interludes

Excerpt from *You Are My Life*

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Orchestral Interlude 1

When Sawsan cooks in preparation for a feast, she always puts in a music tape. While she shapes the kofta on the skewers and spices the lamb kabobs and rolls the grape leaves, she listens to Abdel Halim Hafez's voice intoning the longing and desire for loved ones. She sings or hums along, her fingers dancing across the folding of a grape leaf or turning the kabob over and under to capture the spices in rhythm with the music. Sometimes, it's Farid el Atrash, known as the King of Oud for his exquisite playing, whose notes exude more sadness. His unsettled life moving him from Syria to Egypt and then ending in Beirut emerges in his songs that carry the tone of sadness that distinguishes his music.

When she's baking, Sawsan plays a more contemporary singer like Mohamed Mounir, letting the faster paced music wrap around the kitchen. While she waits for the baklava to cook or the basboosa to soak in its honey or the dough for the kahek to rise, she lifts and swings her hips, carried by the musical notes. Her daughter, Shadya, senses her movements and approaches to peek into the kitchen. When her mother catches her eye, she gestures for her to enter and Shadya's hands are captured by her mother so that the movement travels from mother to daughter, and they dance baladi with hip swings and body twirls and arm twists.

When her mother pulls her into the dance, Shadya feels the music inside her body as if she's the singer releasing the music into the room. The movement of her body gives shape to the orchestra of notes, and she instinctively knows how to roll and twist and sway to express the rhythm of the song. Each dance ends with laughter, and her mother rewards her with a kiss and an exclamation at her beautiful dancing.

This moment of her mother's joy stays with Shadya throughout her life. It opens like a stage curtain into her memories when she is in the middle of cooking, doing laundry, sweeping. It exists in her mind as the interlude between household chores, and sometimes when she is alone, she will venture to find a tape of one of those Egyptian singers and let the music enter into the unfamiliar space.

Orchestral Interlude 3

Shadya stirs the honey on the stove, mixing the sugar and the water, testing their thickness as they simmer and blend. In the bowl on the counter, she puts the chopped walnuts, reaches for the cinnamon, pours a mound into the palm of her hand, drops it on the walnuts, and then adds two spoons of sugar. She finds the glass bottle of rose water and twists the top open. Measuring a tablespoon with the liquid pouring over the edge, she lets it pour onto the walnuts. She stirs the mixture, the walnuts coating in the ingredients she has added. At the stove, she pulls out a small frying pan, unwraps the sticks of butter and places them in the pan to begin their melting. As the butter spreads into a yellow liquid, she scoops the foam carefully off the top to remove it and keep only the clear butter. She adds two spoons on top of the walnuts to stir them into a mixture that holds together.

In the background of her movements, the tape she has put on allows the voice of Abdel Halim Hafez to enter her kitchen. He intones "awel mara," speaking of the first time his heart has experienced love. Shadya allows herself to sing. She can decipher the spaces between the notes that expand the music. They are in rhythm with her movements from stove to counter

to folding out the layers of phyllo, placing them one by one into the tray, spreading the melted butter between each layer, pausing when half the phyllo sheets are assembled then spreading the walnut mixture on top and flattening it out with a gentle urging until it is evenly placed across the tray, then adding more layers until it is complete, finishing by cutting the straight lines followed with angled lines to create a series of diamond shaped pieces of baklava. Before placing it in the oven, she brushes a thin layer of butter to keep the tray intact as it enters the heat.

Shadya's body moves in motion with the music, her hips a gentle lift to the rhythm of the orchestra that cradles Abdel Halim Hafez's voice, that measures each note then improvises on it as the sound of the crowd urges the singer on to draw out the emotion of the song until each listener feels that longing in the center of their heart. Shadya's voice joins the singer in perfect harmony as the song enters her body, takes over each movement she makes, the familiar sounds echoing inside her and emerging. In Arabic, her voice can sing the quarter tones and lengthened rhythm of words. It's only then that she comes close to finding what she has lost, but the pain of hearing that music is often too much and she has to turn it off.