

The Singsong of the City

By Lena Obaid

If you listen closely, this city will speak to you.

If you are looking for words, for consonants and vowels and syllables, you will not find them. But if you place your ear, gently, holding your breath and closing your eyes, you'll hear it; in the soft murmurs of the sand. The vibrations of the roads, the shifting of the stars, the rhythm of the waves. Abu Dhabi's story is told in a language of its own.

Walking through the heart of the city before sunset, the young evening breeze sings out to you.

You can make it out amid the whirring of bicycles and laughter on corniche. It carries from the Gulf, a story from years ago, of pearl-divers, and the hardships of the life on water. The glistening triumph of the day's catch. The trust in the captain of the ship to return to shore.

The air intercepts, to tell of modern colors. The loud, kaleidoscopic burst of fireworks on New Year's Eve. The roar of aerobatic planes on December 2, dancing ahead of a swirl of green, white and red.

As the light fades, another sound emerges, of a budding musician playing the saxophone in the outdoor seating of a cafe one cool night. The gasp of a child trying to hold his breath, eyes glittering in awe. The disturbed flow of pedestrians as they pass him, stopping in their tracks, to hear the sweet sound of the instrument. Pausing in the bustle to simply exist in the moment.

Far from the bright streetlights, the twinkling brilliance of the stars is stark against the darkness of the night. The absence of sound. Then, once your ears become attuned, you hear the gentle

humming of a telescope in the city's observatory, the unmistakable click of a camera photographing a galaxy. The same stars our ancestors used to guide them on their travels.

In the winter, fog hangs low, as if the clouds decided to greet the people they have seen from above. One spring day, a sandstorm blankets the city, sand so thick in the air it coats the inside of your throat. The next, a thunderstorm drowns the streets, bold thunderclaps reverberating across the island. The day after, the warm blanket of humidity curls itself around lamp posts, and settles close to the ground.

But the the next morning, the sun shines bright. The soft drip of an ice cream cone onto the sidewalk in 45 degree weather. An old woman stops a 20 year old muslim to ask for directions to the nearby church. A group of university students practice for a volleyball tournament on the beach. The sound of the Ad'han calling on Friday. Elsewhere, the drumbeat of camels racing.

In one neighborhood, a young boy kicks a football with his friends, while his mother occasionally glances out at him from the window. To her, home used to be somewhere far away. To him, Abu Dhabi is the only home he's ever known.

Because maybe, home is not confined to one place.

Maybe, home is in the sea and in the sand and in the air.

Maybe home is in the love people have for one another.

But this is a conversation for another time.

For now, as the sun prepares to set again, the pearl-divers climb back onto their ship, the travelers pitch their tents in the sand, the working day ends. The Abu Dhabi sky folds the clouds into swirls of cotton candy, sending the seagulls flying, scorpions scuttling, and streetlights clicking, singing in celebration, and in anticipation, of a new day.