

Crossing Cultures through our Children

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I thought I'd died and gone shopping when I discovered that Carrfour, the United Arab Emirates' answer to Walmart, offered childcare.

A Canadian friend living in Abu Dhabi assured me the Jumpy Castle was a perfectly safe place to leave my children for an hour. All I had to do was check them in, strap an identity band to their wrists, and give the nice man who guards the facility my mobile number so he could call me if a problem arose.

Satisfied that it was secure, I gleefully waved good-bye to my kids and set off to get my groceries. Never more than a minute away from them, my phone was silent and so thus I presumed, were my children.

But when I returned to the Jumpy Castle, forty-five minutes later, the place was empty.

I quickly scanned the area before practically grabbing the rather bored looking attendant by his shirt. "Where are my children?" I demanded.

"Little ones? Yellow hair? Little, little?" He pushed the palm of his hand toward the ground, indicating they might be about a foot tall.

"Yes! My little children! Where are they?"

"Gone." He shrugged. "They are gone."

The time for that Canadian diplomacy we are so internationally noted for passed as quickly as my heart rapped a rhythm of total terror against my chest.

Instantly I became a raving lunatic, shrieking in hysteria, "What do you mean they're gone? You were supposed to take care of them! What have you done with my children?"

Sitting still at his post, my attendant friend cocked his head to the side to stare at me intently, apparently trying to figure out why I was so upset. By then my screaming had attracted the attention of a uniformed guard patrolling the store's entrance, as well as the curiosity of a large number of shoppers.

"There is a problem, madam?" The guard asked me.

"Yes, there's a problem! This man," I pointed a shaking finger at the attendant, "Has lost my children!"

If you've never lost the kids that only about an hour earlier you were desperate to unload, let me tell you, it is akin to a near death experience.

Trying not to panic, you wonder if they are for sale in the souk somewhere and what you will tell you husband when you return with a carload of groceries but not his children. You pray to God or Allah or whoever is listening to give you back your life.

Seconds were sacred. While the rest of the grocery-shopping world moved mindlessly around me, my part of the earth stood still and the silent stares of passersby only fueled my fury.

The guard who had come to my rescue rattled something off in Arabic to the attendant and then turned to me and said, “He says they have gone with an old woman. The little one was crying. An old woman has taken them.”



Photo by Author

Three hundred and sixty-five days a year it is sunny in Abu Dhabi, but that day a black cloud dropped from the blue sky, covering the sun and its shine the way dark cloth falls from the heads of the Muslim women, cloaking their lovely faces.

Suddenly I was frighteningly aware of how language and cultural barriers could block the search for my children. Where would I go? Who would I talk to? How would I make them understand?

Leaving the unhelpful men behind me, I took matters into my own hands, and did what the average mother does well: I hollered my children’s names. I ran, screaming for my kids, into the grocery store.

And just like that, the sun broke through the clouds.

She was moving through the toiletries like she was walking through the park, holding the hands of the two young children she was caring for. Shuffling slowly, hindered by old age and the length of flowing black cloth that entwined her from head to toe, she wore the traditional burqua mask. It stretched across her face, hiding her nose and most of her visage from the male portion of the world, but it did not conceal her smile from me as I fell to my knees before her, wrapping my arms around what makes my world whole.

“Shukran,” I said. Thank you.

“Afwan.” She nodded. You are welcome.

And we were.

We were welcome to make ourselves at home in the UAE, but we were not invited to judge the village mentality of the Middle East, where strangers touched our kids’ heads, in awe of blonde hair, and offered advice or a handful of candy when our kids were crying.

Children were treasured and adults were trusted to honor their innocence and to guard their safety. Even when the children were not their own.