

He Loves Me; He Loves Me Not

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Originally Published by Kamloops This Week

“So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Career contemplation may be a bit heavy for ten year olds, but I put the question to them anyway. It was our second year in Abu Dhabi and I was teaching fourth grade at a local school.

“We’re doing time capsules for the New Year,” I explained to my class of fourteen kids. “Where do you see yourselves in the future?”

Aisha was going to be a teacher. Nicholas had engineering plans, while Bouthayna’s ambition was to study art at the University of San Fransico, where her American mother met her Arab father. Ahmed, the brightest boy in the class, wasn’t sure what he wanted to be, but he was certain he wanted to travel the world.

And then there was Ibrahim. An intensely driven kid from a feverously religious family, he used to present me with candies and small gifts from time to time. His mother said he was in love with me.

How could I have known that when he raised his childish hand to answer my adult question, he was signaling his departure from a place of innocence in my mind, to a place of horror?

“Yes, Ibrahim. What do you want to be when you grow up?” I asked.

“A suicide bomber,” he said.

“Par-don me?” The words slid from my gaping mouth in slow motion.

Grinning with the glee that comes from rattling an adult, eyes narrowed, dusted with a dazed determination, Ibrahim repeated: “I want to be a suicide

bomber. I want to kill all the Americans so I can die a martyr.”

A stunned silence descended upon the room like a white sheet might float to cover a dead body; wafting slowly downwards, light as air, yet heavy enough to cover in darkness, what no one wants to see.

Most of the families we met in the five years we lived in the United Arab Emirates typified all that is pleasant, all that is celebratory about the Arab culture.

They were generous and hospitable.



Photo Paul Linden

They invited us into their homes for meals and into their shops for banter and bartering, where it was customary to offer tea along with the “best price, Madam, best, best price.”

Invitations to weddings and gifts delivered to the workplace were not uncommon. Curious about the west, most locals were receptive to our presence, although there were exceptions.

I just never dreamed Ibrahim was one of them.

I guess I traveled to the Middle East with naïve suitcases, empty of prejudices, but returned carrying the heavier load of experienced baggage. Arab culture, coupled with Islamic religion, creates an atmosphere radically different than our western one.

And while Islam calls for love and peace, there is controversy over whether the Quoran also calls for violence, promising rewards for those who spread the word, daring to die in the name of their faith.

Whether it was the Iman wailing his call to prayer five times a day from the mosque turret or the cloaked teacher hollering the Quoran across the hall, religious messages were delivered in a non-stop, pump up the volume kind of way.

Some call it passion. Others call it brain washing. No matter, you couldn't help but hear it. And you didn't dare to question it. Most Muslim states are non-democratic and thus there is no freedom of speech. Defamation of state and religion are punishable acts.

And so, like that sheet falling upon the lifeless form, the realization that some bridges can't be crossed because the divide is just too wide; some understandings can't be reached and some philosophies can't be shared; slowly dawned upon me, wafting down, stifling the belief that we are all the same, killing the idea that it should be easy to get along.

But I still believe it is a gift to journey, at least for a visit, to the other side. Take a look around. We may not be able to adopt the beliefs we encounter there, but the vast majority of people we meet will encourage us to at least respect what we find.

Now, inundated with news about terrorist arrests in Toronto, I am, like most people, frightened of the potentially disastrous consequences, angry at the audacity of a group of people who seek to destroy western values and freedoms with violence, but saddened too, at the one-dimensional picture presented of Muslims, painted with bloody strokes from radical brushes.

And as I read about promising young men turning into terrorists, I can't help but wonder where Ibrahim—who brought me flowers with one hand and declared his desire to die with the other—is now.