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Home

I just turned fourteen, and there was a month left of grade eight. I was old for my class, because my mother has decided I “wasn’t ready” for Kindergarten when I turned five, so she held me back until I was six. Who isn’t ready for kindergarten? What was she waiting for? A personal essay on why I felt kindergarten was right for me? I guess it doesn’t matter now, though kids used to tease me for “failing” kindergarten. They didn’t really ease up when I pointed out the inaccuracy of their taunts; taunts don’t wither in in the bright light of truth, I learned. My Dad says I’ll get my driver’s license before anyone else. That’s the only bright side he can think of, even though I’m not really that bothered by it. (He doesn’t have much more to say when I ask if I’ll have a car to go along with that license in two years...)

Most of the kids from my elementary school came to the same Junior High. I was on the same bus home, with the same people, for nearly eight years.

“Hey, Moustache, there’s your temple. Time to get off the bus!” They were talking to me. I didn’t have to turn around to know that it was Warren that said it. He was in ninth grade, and probably younger than me. Definitely shorter.

He was talking about a mosque on the corner. It was indeed my bus stop, but it was not my temple, or even my mosque. I’m Mormon, not Muslim. It’s not like we’re easy to conflate, but try explaining that to a fourteen year-old searching for the dumbest thing that could make his peers laugh. In fact, I did try to explain it once; a mistake which only cemented the bizarre taunt as a daily ritual. There was even a Muslim kid on the bus, Barir, and he never said anything even though that probably *was* his mosque. I didn’t blame him. Keep your head down, right? It might not have been his mosque — I don’t know a ton about Islam — but he did get off at the same stop as me. He was in grade seven, so we didn’t talk as per the unwritten rules of junior high inter-grade interaction, but I knew he was Muslim because I’d actually spotted a Koran in his backpack once. (His copy was spelled “Quran”. I don’t know the difference.)

Nothing the grade nines said was too malicious actually. Well, it wasn’t always that way. I know they called me Moustache, but my name is actually Spencer, by the way. Let me see if I can trace the etymology that particular sobriquet. Stay with me. Mormon is the nickname for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That’s the official name, and it’s a mouthful, and Mormon is just easier, even for Mormons. Anyway, for a long time bullies and idiots called me all manner of names that technically broke the commandment to not take the Lord’s name in vain. Soon they started calling me “Messiah”, then “Handel’s Messiah”, then “Handel”, then ‘Handle-bar”, then “Handlebar Moustache”, then, inevitably, just “Moustache”. This charming evolution had taken place over a single winter of bus rides when I was in grade seven. It’s a weird trajectory, but it could be a lot worse.

Marty, who used to come over for playdates when I was four, gets called “dirty Jew” because he had some bad body odour for a while during puberty, a problem which he first solved with too much cologne, followed by the right amount of anti-perspirant. But the name stuck. I wondered about it sometimes; I know the kids who called him that got the expression from watching the TV show *South*

Park; it's what Cartman calls his friend Stan. I bet the kids saying it don't even have anything against Jews; why would they? We're kids. They just think it's funny to pretend to be anti-semitic. It's ironic, I guess, or at least they think it is. I mean, it's super mean, but I don't think they... well, let's just say I don't think they put a lot of thought into the things they say to other people. They're all young, sheltered Canadians, so it's possible they don't have a context for anti-semitism *outside* of irony.

My older cousin used to say that public school is like a giant rock tumbler. All the weird sharp edges and antisocial quirks get chipped off and smoothed out over the years, and even though the process hurts, people come out the other end shiny, stronger and more resilient. Jury's still out on that. Bullying as a character builder, rather than as an engine for trauma, depression and psychological devastation? I guess if you can't change it, you might as well put a positive spin on it.

"He's going home to his six moms," said Chris Chipman, a tall skinny grade nine kid. Mormons hadn't practiced polygamy for 150 years, but apparently the idea of plural marriage was too rich a comic vein for the collective consciousness to let go.

I began to explain that they were misinformed, and as I saw their eyes glaze over, and their mouths pull into tight grimaces, I decided to try changing the subject. Well, a pivot, really. In as friendly a tone as I could, I asked, "So what do you guys believe? Religiously, I mean. Are any of you religious?" I secretly hoped my question might jog the memories of those among my grade nine tormentors who had received some sort of religious instruction, and remind them of one or two virtues they might have been taught, like, or I don't know, kindness? Pretty much every church teaches at least that, right?

"I'm an atheist!" one of the grade nine boys, Derek, proclaimed loudly.

"You mean you're agnostic," said Lisa, the red-haired girl in the seat behind him. "That's what I am. It means I don't know. No one knows, really. You don't know if there's a God, Derek!"

"It's called science, Lisa," said Derek derisively. "God is science."

Lisa huffed. "Science hasn't proven there's no God! And religion hasn't proved there is one. Agnostic is the only rational..."

"My Aunt's family is Jehovah's Witness," said Seth, interrupting. "My cousins don't celebrate Christmas."

"But what are you?" Lisa asked.

Seth shrugged. "Christian, I guess."

"I'm Christian," said Warren.

"Me, too!" I offered. Maybe this was a good idea after all.

"No you're not, Moustache. Mormons aren't Christian! Nice try." Warren stared at me like I was the stupidest person on earth. "Christians believe in the Bible, not the Book of Mormon!"

I started to offer a defence, namely that Mormons worship Jesus Christ, and that we do believe in the Bible, which seemed like a fairly rock solid defence. But then thought better of it, or maybe I just lost my nerve, and I turned around in my seat and kept silent for the rest of the bus trip. I listened as Derek

and Lisa debated whether or not it was possible to prove the existence of God. (For the record, the outcome of their debate was inconclusive.)

I winced as the air brakes on the bus squealed, and I slung my backpack over my shoulder and headed for the door. "See you tomorrow, Moustache!" I heard from the peanut gallery at the back. "Have fun at Church!"

Barir was off the bus before me, but when I went down the stairs behind him, he was just standing on the sidewalk blocking my exit.

"Excuse me," I finally had to say. Without turning around, Barir took a step to the right. I got off the bus and it pulled away. I looked at Barir, and then followed his gaze. Against the white wall of the mosque was a red spray painted swastika and the words "go home".

My heart started to beat faster and my eyes widened. I looked back at Barir, who was silent.

"Oh man." I said. "That's, um..." I scrambled for words. "That's not good." Barir still said nothing. "Right?" I said.

He turned to look at me, as if he had just realized I was standing beside him.

"Should we, like call someone?" I said. "Like, call the police, or your... dad... or something?"

"There are cameras," Barir said, and sighed. "They'll check the cameras, and see who did it. Or at least see the kind of hoodies they wore."

We stood for a moment in silence. "Sorry," I said at last. "That's messed up."

"Thanks."

"I'm Mormon, so I sort of understand religious persecution."

Barir looked at me, incredulously. "What?"

"Well, it's not, like, a contest or anything," I said sheepishly. I thought about Mormon pioneers, my ancestors who emigrated north from Utah and settled most of southern Alberta.

Barir started walking toward the mosque and stopped at a wooden bench on the lawn facing the graffiti, about thirty metres back on a well-manicured lawn. The bench was underneath a large tree, (an oak?) whose branches had just filled out over the last few weeks. He sat down in the shade of the tree.

I felt weird still being here, looking at him. I knew I should probably go home. Maybe he wants to be left alone? After a few moments, I walked over to the bench and sat down beside him. We sat in silence.

"Why would somebody paint a swastika?" I asked at last. "I thought that was a Nazi thing."

"It is."

"But I thought Nazis hated Jews. Jewish people." The word "jew" always sounded like an epithet to my ears, so I tended to say "jewish people" instead. I wondered from time to time if that was somehow racist of me. Probably.

"Nazis are more like against all... non-Nazis," said Barir. "Besides, I doubt they were Nazis, not real ones. They were just trying to scare me. Us."

"Right," I said. I picked my words carefully. "Will, um, will people be... scared?"

"No. I don't think so. Some might be angry, or sad, but not scared."

I nodded. "Well, sorry Barir." And then, after a pause, "I *am* sorry."

Barir said "thanks" again, and put his backpack on the grass beside the bench.

We both looked at the mosque. It really was lovely to look at. I frowned at the fresh graffiti, and shot a glance to Barir, who was still staring at it, his expression unreadable.

"That's a pretty weak swastika," I pointed out. "No sharp right angles. It's more like a sloppy 's' and a tilde."

Barir smiled a little. "Yeah," he said. "No art school scholarship for these geniuses."

I cleared my throat. I didn't know what to say, but somehow felt responsible to keep the conversation moving. "Where are you from?" I asked, and then quickly added, "Originally. Your family I mean."

Barir cast a sideways glance in my direction. "Edmonton."

I felt my ears get hot. "I meant..."

"I know what you meant." His shoulders dropped, and Barir traced a seam in the wood of the bench seat with his finger. "My grandparents immigrated to Canada from India after World War II. They settled here. My parents were born here. I was born here. We're as Canadian as you or anyone else." he said.

I sputtered. "I didn't..."

Barir cut me off. "I know," he said, and sighed. "I know." He nodded his head toward the spray painted wall. "'Go home,' it says. I don't even..." he didn't finish the sentence, and I didn't press.

After a long pause, Barir spoke again. "Do they even understand why people come here in the first place? Why..." his voice trailed off again.

We sat in silence. I found myself listening to the chirps of a bird that had landed in the tree above us. The sun glistened off the iridescent dome of the mosque, and I shifted my position on the bench to avoid the glare stinging my eyes.

"You're religious," Barir said after a while. I nodded, though he hadn't asked it as a question.

"Why?" He asked.

No one had asked me that before.

When I didn't answer, Barir spoke again. "You believe in it? All of it?"

I wasn't lying when I told Barir that I did, and then asked him the same question.

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly. "But why?"

I looked at him. "I don't think I understand the question," I said.

"Why do you believe in *something* instead of *nothing*? Like Lisa said on the bus, there's no proof of God or any of this."

I remembered Lisa's comment. I also knew that she was essentially right. "That's where faith comes in," I said, carefully. "Believing in something even if... despite not having any evidence."

"Faith," Barir said. "What makes you want to have faith in the first place? You don't have to believe in a life after death or a supreme being in order to live a good life. Why is faith worth it?"

I had never really examined the question that Barir was posing. I went to Church because my parents took me to Church every Sunday. Their parents had taken them to Church every Sunday. I had obviously considered the possibility that it was all garbage; a fairy tale ascribing arbitrary meaning to a meaningless bio-chemical fluke of intelligent life; but for some reason...

"It's a choice," I said at last. "A choice to believe."

"Based on what?"

"Based on a feeling, I guess. A feeling and maybe a hope that I can't explain."

Barir nodded thoughtfully. I knew he knew the feeling I was talking about. "Something inside you," he said. "God put it there?"

"Maybe. I guess so." I was suddenly keenly aware of the pull I felt towards the divine, and resolved silently to examine it more closely.

We were quiet again for a while, the steady sounds of traffic drifting over the grass to our bench.

"There is beauty in the world," Barir said, suddenly, but he was looking at the graffiti when he said it. "Beautiful things built by the religious and non-believers."

"Irreligious," I said.

Barir turned to face me again. "Horrible things, atrocities, have been done in the name of Gods and by the irreligious as well."

"We're all just people." I said. "Making choices."

"And us," said Barir. "You believe your Church is the one true Church, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you believe my religion is wrong."

I wasn't sure what he wanted me to say, or what I should say. "I don't..."

Barir laughed. "Don't worry. I think you're wrong, too."

I considered this. "It doesn't mean we can't learn from each other," I offered.

Barir didn't answer. "The same feeling led us in different directions. Can you explain that?"

I shrugged. "No."

"Me neither," Barir said and looked over to the road, watching cars drive by up the avenue.

We were quiet again for a long time, lost in thought. This had been the most grown-up conversation I'd ever had about faith. I was more than a little surprised to be having it with a grade seven kid named Barir. I guess I had never really examined why I believed what I did, not very deeply, or why. And what that feeling inside me — that assurance of something greater — meant about my place in the universe. Or Barir's for that matter.

Finally, Barir said, "You're right that we should call someone."

"Of course," I shook my head. "This is a crime scene! We, uh, we should call the cops? Right? The police?" I pulled out my phone.

"I should call my Imam," said Barir, putting a hand on my arm.

"You... wanna call your Mum?" I asked, incredulously. It came out sounding more condescending than I anticipated.

"*Imam*," Barir enunciated more clearly. "It means our leader, like a priest. Do you have priests in Mormon?"

"Mormonism. And yes, I know what you mean. But we should call the police, too, right?"

Barir sighed. "I know. But when the police come, the media comes, and then it's on the news, and because this is a mosque, it could make national news."

I furrowed my brow. "But that's good, right? Isn't it? I mean, people should know." I pointed at the wall. "This isn't right."

Barir squinted and looked back at the graffiti. He shook his head. "What if you and I were the only people that saw this? Wouldn't that be something? Just us?"

I waited before speaking again. "You... want us to clean it up?" I was surprised at how ready I was to do that.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I just..." He trailed off.

"What about justice?" I asked, though I felt foolish for saying it afterwards. It felt like a comic book word. I cast about for clarifying words, but came up empty. "You know?"

Barir sighed again. "I just mean, are people really like this?"

"You mean racist?" I didn't think that was the right word, exactly. What was the word if someone hated a religion? "Uh... anti-religionist?" I said, knowing it was wrong.

"No. Yes. I mean, the people that did this," he waved a hand toward the mosque, "they are small hateful people. Maybe just one person. I think, maybe. Right?"

"Okay."

"And that's the thing. One person out of however many tens of millions can make it seem like this is a thing. Like it's a lot of people."

"Yeah," I said. "You don't think it's a lot of people?"

"That would do this? No. But who feel that way? I don't know. Maybe. I hope not. Not a lot of people. Not here. Do you think?"

I shrugged.

Barir ran his hands through his hair, and began tapping the heel of his shoe on the ground nervously. "Putting this on the news," he said, "it just makes it *bigger*. More people see it. I feel like that's what the... vandals want. To *make it a big deal*, instead of what it is.

"What is it?"

"Just some scared dummy with no clue, but enough Canadian Tire money for a can of spray paint."

"But people will be outraged, won't they? I mean, people won't stand for something like this. Isn't that good?"

Barir looked at me carefully. "Maybe. But I don't *want it* to be a big deal, you know? Everything that has to do with religion, my religion, feels like a big deal. Sometimes you just want to be left alone. To believe what you want in peace. Let everybody just believe whatever they want. You know?"

I nodded. I did know, actually. I knew the sickening feeling of being ashamed for what I believed – not because it was bad, or wrong, but because I didn't want to be made fun of by people who didn't know the meaning of "sacred". I always felt guilty afterward, though. I wanted to be proud of who I was and what I believed, but that wasn't always possible.

"Like on the bus," Barir continued. "The way the other kids talk to you about being Mormon. Don't you feel... separate? Like an alien, sometimes?"

I looked down at my feet and poked some clover in the grass with the toe of my sneakers. "I guess so." I thought for a moment about the things I'd been through because I believe in a religion that was barely older than Canada. "But kids will pick on anything that's different. Elliott Kipp in grade nine gets called '*Ginger*' even though Lisa's got red hair, too."

Barir rubbed his forehead with his hand. "You're right about calling the police," he said at last. "I guess I just wish it hadn't happened. This was the handiwork of one or two idiots, and I don't want people across the country to think it's normal, or..."

"They won't!"

Barir smiled. "Some will. It's going to make some people think about me and my beliefs as something separate, or strange, or that it's something that maybe *could* be bad. But it isn't. We aren't."

Barir pulled a phone out of his backpack and dialed a number. "I'm calling the Imam, first. He'll know what to do."

I only heard his side of the conversation, as he explained the situation to his spiritual leader. When he hung up, he turned to me. "He's going to drive over, but he said to call the police now."

"Are you sure?"

Barir shrugged. "I mean, it *is* a crime. Like you said."

I held Barir's gaze for a moment, and then looked down at my phone. I dialed 9-1-1. It felt weird, I've never called that number before.

"Hello, what's your emergency?" a female voice intoned on the other end of the line. My heart sped up again. I pulled the phone away from my ear and tapped the button to turn on the speaker.

"Um, hi," I said. "I am reporting graffiti?" I said it like a question.

"Sir, you need to call 3-1-1 and speak to a city bylaw officer."

"No, I mean, it's on a mosque." I looked at Barir and winced. He was staring at my phone. "The one on 17th Avenue."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I kept talking. "So it's graffiti, but it's also, like, a hate crime, right? Is that an emergency?"

"One moment," the voice said, finally. "I have an officer being dispatched to your location. And what is your name?"

"Spencer," I said. "Spencer Graves. I'm here with, um Barir." I looked at him, and he read my expression.

"Barir Aman," he said. "Hi."

"It's his mosque. We go to the same school." I looked at Barir, and he nodded approval.

The dispatcher had us stay on the line until the police car showed up. They got there in, like, three minutes. I was surprised when they finally pulled up because for some reason I was expecting to hear sirens, but they just pulled into the parking lot like any old car.

Two cops got out. One of them went to the wall and the other came over to talk to us.

"You're Spencer?" He said to me. I nodded. "And you are..."

"Barir Aman," said Barir.

"This is his mosque." I said. Barir said nothing.

The officer asked us a few more questions, — where we lived, our phone numbers, stuff like that. Then he knelt down on one knee and looked at Barir. “So this is your mosque?”

Barir nodded.

“Are you Shi’a or Sunni?” the cop asked.

Barir cocked his head. “Shi’a.” He replied. I didn’t even know what that meant. There are different types of Muslim?

“I’m Mormon,” I said, wanting to contribute somehow. The cop shot me a glance, nodded, smiled, and then turned back to Barir. “My last partner was Shi’a. Adeel Farhat. You know him, by any chance?” Barir shook his head. “Yeah, I thought maybe not. Well, he was a good man.”

The cop turned as a van crunched up the driveway into the parking lot. The van had a picture of local newsman Mitch Preston on the side, below the words “Action 5 News” in thick orange italics. A sliding door opened and out came field reporter Amy Saunders and her bearded cameraman. They made their way toward the building, where they were intercepted by the other cop, who had been taking pictures.

Our cop turned back to us. “I’m sorry,” he said to Barir, and put a hand on his shoulder. Barir nodded again. “This isn’t...” he searched for the right words, but didn’t finish the thought.

“I know,” Barir said.

The cop squeezed his shoulder again. Then he looked at me again. “Mormon?” he said.

“Yep.”

“I don’t know any Mormons.”

“That’s okay,” I said. He laughed.

“Be a good friend to Barir, Spencer.”

“I will,” I said. “We ride the bus together, so...” I didn’t want to say I hadn’t spoken to him before today.

“A Mormon and a Muslim,” he said, and stood up, smiling and shaking his head.

“Is that weird?” I asked. I didn’t know what he was getting at.

“On the contrary,” he said. “I wish there was a Sikh, a Hindu, an atheist and a Scientologist on this bench.”

I still didn’t understand. I looked at Barir, but he was still looking at the cop.

“Get a Jew, a... Mennonite, a, uh, Buddhist...” he trailed off.

I opened my mouth to speak, but then thought better and closed it. The cop scrunched up his face and looked back at us. “I see this from time to time,” he said, pointing behind him to the defaced Mosque. “Not a lot, but more often than I’d like.” He caught Barir’s eyes again.

"Why do you think people do this?" Barir asked.

The cop took off his hat and scratched his head before putting it back on. "People,.." he began, and then paused for a moment, before thinking better of what he was about to say, and started a new sentence instead. "Do you think that the person who did this would have done this if he knew a Muslim. Like, really knew one? If he knew you, for example?"

"No," Barir and I said together.

"People," he began again. "That is, some people," he spoke the next part very slowly, "can't see the beauty in the mosaic." He knelt down again, and took a deep breath. He was about to say something else, but was interrupted by his partner yelling at him.

"Terry!" The man hollered. I guess our cop's name was Terry. "News 5 wants to talk to the boys who called 9-1-1!"

He turned to face us, his eyebrows raised quizzically. Barir and I looked at each other. "No thanks," I said. Barir shook his head, too.

Terry nodded. "I get it," he said.

"The Imam is coming here," Barir said. "He'll talk to them."

As if on cue, a dark blue SUV pulled into the parking lot, and a big man emerged. The Imam, I figured, though he didn't look the way I thought he would. Then again, I couldn't exactly picture what I was expecting. He looked at the defaced wall of the mosque for a moment, and then over to us. His expression was grim. He waved, and Barir and I waved back. He started toward Amy Saunders and the other cop.

Terry turned his attention back to us. "You boys don't have to stick around. We have your info, we'll be in touch if we need to be."

"Thanks," said Barir.

"Yeah, thanks," I added.

Terry smiled at us both. "Take care," he said, and sounded like he really meant it. Then he turned and walked over to where Amy Saunders and his partner were talking with the Imam, as the cameraman finished setting up the camera and framing his shot of the graffiti.

Barir stood up first, and picked up his backpack off the grass where he'd placed it about thirty minutes earlier, though it felt much, much longer.

We lived in opposite directions, but it felt weird to just split up, now. We had *been through something* together.

"Action 5," I said, nodding toward Amy preening herself before the camera rolled. "Maybe this is a big deal after all."

Barir smiled briefly, and then furrowed his brow. "Do you think that cop was right about what he said?"

"Which part? Like if the low-lives that spray painted the mosque, they wouldn't have done it if they just knew a Muslim?"

"Yeah. Or about knowing people generally. Do you think that works? I mean, is that it?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't know." I squinted up at the sun, still shining brightly in the early summer sky. "I guess it's hard to have unkind feelings towards a group of people if you actually know one of them. That makes sense, I think." I suddenly thought of Warren's declaration that he was Christian, and added, "As long as that one you know isn't a jerk."

Barir laughed, and then extended his hand, which I shook. It seemed oddly formal, but appropriate at the same time. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said. "Thanks for hanging out with me, and for..." he gestured widely with his hands, "everything."

"No problem," I said. And then, because I couldn't think of anything else to say, I added, "Sorry again."

Barir smiled. "I forgive you," he said, sarcastically. I rolled my eyes.

"So," I said, "what should we do now?"

Barir pointed to the mosque behind me. "I don't know about you, but like the sign says," he said, and turned to walk toward the sidewalk, calling back over his shoulder as he walked, "I'm going home."

The End