

Forgive me. I don't know your name. After all, I have only seen you once. I hope you are able to help me since I have no one else to reach out to. I know you must be wondering why, out of all people, I chose you. I don't have the answer myself. But I can tell you this ... when I looked into your eyes, I thought you were somewhat different.

Now, I will begin my story.

Do you really know our city, Baghdad, sir? Most people would try to find eloquent words to describe it. For me, Baghdad is a city that has evaporated into tiny particles of filth. We often think that our lives are ordinary. We often look down on the streets, crowded with our fathers going to work, our children going to school, and our mothers praying for our souls and taking care of our homes. Some say that Baghdad has changed since the war, but I believe that things are the same. We are the same. I'm the same. Our Muslim brothers are the same. Everyone sees "justice" differently.

My parents are both dead. My mother passed away when I was born, leaving my father to raise my brother and me. Then my father was executed; his only crime being that he wanted to practice religious freedom.

Mohammed is a professor of English at Baghdad University. He says that having obtained his PhD from the University of Oxford in England is the greatest source of pride in his life. As a professor, he earns enough money for our family, which means that once every two weeks, he can bring home one or two kilos of meat. My brother is happy with his life as long as we are too. To him, happiness doesn't mean a brand-new car or luxurious food, it means a stable life.

My brother met his wife Noor in England; theirs was a

love story that blossomed for years. Their love was strong; they waited patiently, only marrying after their return to Iraq. My brother and his wife cannot conceive a child, and for them adoption is not an option. My brother explained that in Islam, it is *haram* to adopt children. Is this true, sir? I wonder.

Mohammed has always taken care of me and been a father figure to me, helping to raise me when our father was fighting for the rights of Shiites. Our father often travelled to the city of Karbala, where he would participate in private Shiite ceremonies. During his reign, Saddam forbade any Shiite activities. One day, on the Day of Ashura, years ago, our father and many of his Shiite friends commemorated the martyrdom of Imam Husayn Ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad in Karbala. That day, Saddam had laid down orders for the arrest of our father and many of his friends. They were all eventually executed, my father's blood flowing at the feet of Saddam. As for my mother, I don't have any memory of her; she died during my birth. All I have of her is a single black and white photograph.

Do you ever feel like a prisoner in your own room? I often lie on my bed looking up at the ceiling and wishing I were dead. Or perhaps that I could move to a different country far less religious than Iraq and more open to personal freedom. I don't want to feel this way. But I know what I am. Nothing can change that.

Many times I have thought of escaping, but where would I go? What place would accept me for who I am? As beautiful as Baghdad is, her people are still closed-minded and repressive.

I've not shared my secret with anyone. If my brother found out, he'd kill me.

One day, consumed by sadness and confusing thoughts,

I wanted desperately to talk to someone about my feelings. But who? As I sat at my desk trying to make sense of life, trying to understand my purpose, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I said. It was Mohammed, a warm smile on his face.

“How are you doing today?”

“Fine,” I said vaguely.

“Any exams coming up?”

“No.”

He asked if there was something wrong.

“No. Why?”

“I’m just asking.”

All of a sudden, I felt overwhelmed and quickly wiped the tears from my eyes, forcing a smile. It’s just how things went in this house.

“Are you crying?” he asked.

I shook my head. Mohammed sat on the bed and looked at me, waiting for a response. I turned away.

“Look at me,” he whispered.

I sighed. “I told you, everything is all right.”

He stood up to leave, but on his way out, said, “Remember, I’m always here for you.”

I guess I was supposed to believe that, but if he knew the truth, it would be a different story.

Later, after praying, I passed Mohammed on the staircase.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Out with friends.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Do you not have exams?”

“I told you I don’t.”

My brother checked his watch. “It’s already eleven. When will you be back?”

Wanting to get away, I said, “I’m not a kid anymore. Did you forget I’m twenty years old?”

“I’ve not forgotten. But I’m worried about you.”

I stared at my older brother for a moment, my only family. But I didn’t want to listen to him.

“I’ll be back soon, I promise,” I said, and hurried down the stairs.

Outside the house, standing for a second, my back against the door and eyes closed, I inhaled the warm polluted air. It was good to have escaped my brother’s interrogation.

I started to walk toward the main road and hailed a taxi, hesitating at first when the driver asked where I wanted to go. I was embarrassed to tell him.

“Can you take me to shaar’a Karada, please?”

I asked him to drop me off a street away from my destination. The cabbie stopped on Karada Street and looked at me quizzically, but didn’t say anything. I quickly paid him and walked away.

Two blocks later I arrived at my destination, a private club. Entering, I spotted a familiar face. He was waiting for me.

In my second year at university, I was always the quiet one, never speaking up during class. One day, the professor gave us a group assignment; I was paired up with this boy, Ali. Unlike me, Ali had a charming personality and was always outspoken. He invited me over to his house after school to work on the assignment. I thought about asking him to my house instead, and then realized that probably wasn’t a good idea. My brother and his wife, well ...

So, I agreed to go to Ali's.

As he drove me to his house, Ali did most of the talking. I spoke only when Ali asked a question. He gave me a brief introduction to his life: he lived with his parents, but they were never around. His father was a diplomat and his parents frequently travelled all over the world. Ali said he wanted to start a business after graduating, but he wasn't sure what kind.

"How often do you see your parents?"

"Not that often, really. Once or twice a year. I often think of them and miss them a lot."

I began to feel connected to Ali. He missed his parents like I missed my mother. At least Ali's parents were still alive, but if they were never around, what was the difference?

Ali's house was luxurious, the size of a villa. Two guards opened the gates as he drove into the compound. I was in awe as we passed an enormous water fountain and parked across from the main door. Ali took me on a tour of the seemingly endless gardens, where I could smell the lemony aroma of the gardenias. Inside, he showed me the majestic living room filled with antiques. I was stunned; he lived in what looked to me like a Mesopotamian palace.

Enconced in his bedroom, we worked on the assignment together, though my mind was anywhere but on school work. When he wasn't looking, I stared at Ali's green eyes, his face that glowed like the blazing sun. I felt myself sinking into a deep pool.

Ali turned to me and smiled. "Forget about this. Let's have a drink."

"Oh, I ... I don't drink."

"Come on, one drink won't hurt." I had always been curious about alcohol, and saying no to Ali would be considered

rude. One drink couldn't hurt.

We sat in the living room eating *baba ghanouj* and drinking *arak*. My brother never allowed alcohol in the house. At first, I hated the strong bitter taste, but after the first drink, I wanted more. Before long, we were both drunk; I passed out on the couch.

Later, when I woke up and checked my watch, I was shocked that it was so late. Ali was at the other end of the couch, asleep himself.

"I need to go home," I said, waking him.

He rubbed his eyes. "You can stay over for the night."

"I can't. My brother will kill me."

"I don't see what the big deal is. Keep me company."

"I know, but my brother—"

"Fine. I'll give you a ride home."

And so ended our first night together.

We didn't speak of it until one day the following week, after a class, when Ali and I left the campus and went for a drive. We stopped outside Zawraa Park, where we went for a walk past the amusement rides, through the blossoming flowers, and into the woods. It was secluded and isolated. We looked at each other.

"Are you ...?" Ali said, his voice trailing off.

"Kiss me, Ali," I whispered boldly. He pulled me in for a rough kiss; we breathed in each other's warm bodies. Suddenly he turned me around and pulled my jeans down to my feet. He wet his fingers with his spit and ... I shut my eyes, letting him in. I had fantasized about my first encounter with Ali, and now ...

At the club, I pulled Ali's head toward mine and kissed him passionately before dragging him to the dance floor. I had never felt so free in my life. Later we took a break to have a drink at the bar with our friend Bashar. Ali told us both, "I have a sur-

prise for you. This weekend, I'm having a costume party. It will be fun!" A costume party? I was immediately hesitant, not sure what to wear. But Ali seemed so enthusiastic, so I was game, and so was Bashar.

Later, Ali and I went back to Zawraa Park. Under a moon that shone down upon us from between the purple clouds, we took off our shoes and, holding hands, stepped into the waters of the lake. No one else was there.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Ali said, looking around.

"You're beautiful," I replied, smiling. "I love you." Letting go of Ali's hand for a second, I looked up at the sky, imploring, "Do you hear me, Allah?"

At the edge of the lake, we sat on the sand, water lapping at our feet. It felt as though nothing in the world could stop us.

When Ali dropped me off at home, I kissed him good-night and climbed out of the car. I looked up and saw Noor staring at us from the window. Did she see the kiss?

I was in my room and about to undress when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"Where were you?" Noor looked at me suspiciously.

"Sorry. I was at a friend's house."

"Your brother was worried about you all night, until I made him go to bed. You know he has to work in the morning."

"Again, I'm sorry—"

"Who is he?"

"Who?"

"The man you were with."

"He's just a friend."

She stared at me coldly.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Who is he?” she repeated.

“I told you, he’s a friend. What do you mean?”

“Tell me the truth.”

I couldn’t.

It was something I couldn’t control or change, even if I wanted to. But would my brother, my sister-in-law, or any other Muslim here accept it? Would you accept it, Sheikh? I didn’t have to think about it for a second. No, these people were raised to listen to the word of God. If He says that homosexuality is a sin and that gays need to be severely punished, then Muslims must obey Him and condemn us.

“What do you mean?” I asked again.

“Nothing,” she said, turning to leave. She hesitated in the doorway, asking, “Is there something you want to tell me, *habibi*?”

“No,” I replied curtly.

“You know you can talk to me any time.”

“I know. Thanks.”

I still wasn’t sure if she’d seen Ali and me kiss, but I was grateful for her kindness.

It was the night of Ali’s costume party. I had decided not to put on my costume until I arrived at Ali’s house. He gave me a hand, helping me with my makeup. When I was done, I looked in the mirror and smiled. It wasn’t me there. Instead, there was a beautiful, fully made-up woman with blonde hair.

“Oh my god,” I said. “I look like Sailor Moon.”

“You look sexy,” Ali said, grinning as he leaned over and kissed me. He was wearing a disco-era white suit, and together, we looked like an Iraqi Ken and Barbie.

Downstairs, we greeted the guests, including Bashar, who was dressed as a belly dancer. We danced and drank the night away. I know you might be offended, Sheikh, and I wouldn't be surprised if you stop reading here. But I hope that you will continue.

Later, I woke up in the middle of the night with a start. I was still at Ali's house. I checked my watch, and was shocked to have let time defeat me again. Trying to get up, I fell right back down—too much drink. I nudged Ali, waking him.

“What?”

“Can you give me a ride home?”

“Stay the night.”

“No. My brother's probably still awake, waiting for me.”

“Always your brother.”

“Ali, you know my situation.”

He soon fell back to sleep. I realized that he was too drunk to drive, so I took a taxi home. But not before I'd removed the makeup, transforming back to my old self.

At home, just as I'd suspected, Mohammed was wide awake, waiting in the living room.

“Where were you?” There was anger in his voice.

“Out. With friends.”

He stared at me, scrutinizing me from top to bottom. “What's this?” He pointed at my face. My heart stopped.

“What?”

He stood up and put a finger to the side of my mouth, then held it in front of me. “This.”

There was a red smudge on his finger.

*Shit*, I thought. “Nothing. I'm very tired, Mohammed. I need to go to sleep.”

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No. Good night.”

“Are you seeing someone?”

“What?”

“What’s her name?”

“None of your business.”

He smiled, happy now. Maybe this was what he’d wanted to hear all along. Maybe it was what he needed to hear.

The next night at the club, Ali, Bashar, and I sat at a table as Arabian pop music played over the speakers. We were talking about nothing in particular when Bashar suddenly blurted out, “I’m thinking of leaving the city.”

“What? Where would you go?” I asked.

“Anywhere. As long as it’s far away from Iraq.”

“Why?”

“My father found out about me.” Ali and I exchanged looks.

“Are you okay?” Ali asked.

“No.” Bashar took a big sip from his drink. “I just can’t live here anymore.”

“You can come to live at my house,” Ali offered.

“Thanks, but I’m staying with Khaled,” Bashar said, referring to his boyfriend. “He’s going to get me out of here, out of this shitty country.”

Suddenly there was a commotion at the entrance. Two masked and armed men rushed in. The three of us stood up as others in the club rushed toward the doors in a panic, fearing that they would be shot. But the masked men pushed their way in our direction until they were face to face with Bashar. Before Ali and I could react, they opened fire and shot him repeatedly. He fell to the floor, dead.

The killers left as quickly as they had arrived. We were in shock; it felt like we were watching a movie. Blood poured from Bashar's wounds—the life of this beautiful human, our friend, had ended so quickly, so suddenly. We sat on the floor next to him, sobbing, but no one dared to call the police because if any of us had, we would all have been put in prison for being at a gathering of homosexuals.

I knew this was a targeted killing, that our dear friend had lost his life because his family, his society, couldn't accept him. Ali and I left the club in shock and tears.

The next day, we had a private gathering at Ali's house to honour and remember Bashar. His killers, of course, would not be brought to justice. It was as if he had never existed. I prayed for divine justice.

Back home that night, we ate in silence at the dinner table. I looked at Mohammed and thought: Really? Are you always there for me? If you knew about me, would you kill me in front of the neighbours, would you mourn if I were killed like Bashar? I realized that my brother wasn't to blame. I was a coward because I didn't have the nerve to speak to my brother, to try to explain. I told myself that I should be braver.

After dinner, I went to my room and was reading a book when Mohammed entered without knocking.

“Are you planning to see that girl again?” he asked.

“There is no girl,” I said.

“That's what I thought.” He paused. What now, I wondered. “I found you a wife.”

“What?”

“I want to make Mama and Baba happy in their graves. They wanted grandchildren. I promised them that.” I didn't know what to say.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, so I’ll leave you now to think about it.”

A short time later, I heard my brother and sister-in-law whispering. I went to the door to listen.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“He didn’t say anything, but I assure you he’s going to accept the offer.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“He doesn’t really have a choice here.” Leaning my forehead against the door, I listened intently.

“Give him some time. I’m sure he will find someone. The boy just needs time.”

“No. Time is running out.”

This moment had come a lot earlier in my life than I’d expected.

Later that night, I left the house after making sure the family was asleep and took a taxi to the club to meet Ali. I don’t know why I was shocked to see two armed police officers standing out front and a sign on the door saying, “Closed, *lawat*.” As I was about to leave, a hand grabbed my arm and pulled me to the side. It was Ali.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Not here. Come with me.” Silently, we walked to his car and got in.

“What happened?” I asked again.

“The fucking cops found out about the club and closed it down. Fuck them, fuck this country. I’m so fucking sick of this shit.” He fell silent and we stared at each other, lost and speechless.

“I’m leaving,” Ali said.

“What?”

“I’m leaving Iraq. Bashar was right.”

When Ali saw the tears threatening to fill my eyes, he kissed my forehead, trying to comfort me. But now his touch felt like a stranger's.

"I can't live here anymore. It's not safe for me," he continued.

"Where are you going?"

"Turkey."

"You can't," I pleaded. "Please don't leave me here alone." I felt like a small child about to lose his parents again.

"I'd never leave you here. Never," he said, surprise in his voice. "You'll come with me."

"But ... I can't leave my family. I don't want to hurt them."

"Sooner or later, they'll find out who you are, and they'll either disown you or kill you ..."

"But—"

"We can't let them slaughter us like animals. We deserve a better life."

"Yes, but—"

"Go get your stuff. You're going to stay with me for a few days until we can leave."

"Tonight?"

"Do you want to come with me or not?"

That night, at home, I sat at my desk, struggling to write a letter to my brother. It took me hours. I had to stop every once in a while and start over. But then I changed my mind and scrapped it entirely. Even through written words, I was afraid of confronting him. Determined, I packed my suitcase quickly. Everything was ready.

I felt like I could trust Ali. I didn't know how on God's earth I would get into Turkey without a visa, but I put my full faith in the man I loved and in God. When I knew that Mohammed and Noor were asleep, I left the house quietly with my suitcase. Ali was waiting outside.

Hesitating, I thought of the sorrow that I knew Mohammed and Noor would feel when they awoke and discovered I was gone. I imagined my parents and how they might have felt. Then an image appeared in front of me: my head severed from my body, a sign placed on it with the word “*lotee*.” That is what they call us. *Lotee*. I imagined people spitting on me, calling me names, and I imagined sitting across from you, Sheikh, listening to you. I thought about living the rest of my life in an unknown land with a man I truly loved. I felt glued to the spot.

“Ali ...”

“Come on, man. Let’s go,” Ali commanded, spurring me to action.

We got into his car. He put on an Amr Diab CD and started to drive away. But then I looked back at the house and thought of my family. My determination was melting away quickly. “Ali, I can’t go with you,” I said.

He stopped the car in the middle of the street.

“Ali, what are you doing?” I asked, but he didn’t say anything. Behind us, angry drivers began to honk their horns.

He didn’t seem particularly upset or surprised. In fact, there was a calm look on his face. Finally, he turned, smiled at me, and said, “I didn’t think you’d be brave enough.”

“Ali ...” I reached toward him.

Then, in one fast motion, he pulled a gun from his pocket, aimed it at the side of his head, and pulled the trigger. Blood sprayed everywhere, including on me. In shock, hardly knowing what I was doing, I jumped out of the car and ran away. I left him there as the cars behind Ali’s continued to sound their horns. It was cowardly, Sheikh, but I was terrified and stunned.

Now I wonder if, all along, this is what “Turkey” meant to

him. And here I am, a young man stuck inside four walls in my brother's house. I am to marry a woman whom I have never met. How will she live with a homosexual? Then again, she might never know. We could live our entire lives together and be blessed with children. But I am sure that we would be miserable. Is that the kind of the life I desire? Should I just end it like Ali did? What about my hopes? Could I even allow myself to dream of becoming someone? I struggle every day with my decision to abandon Ali. If I had said yes, would we have been able to find a place that welcomed us? Does Allah even love us? I have read the Qur'an twice already, and it feels like, in Islam, God does not love us. But why, then, did He create us?

I am writing to you for answers. I need your help. Are you willing to help me? You do not know my name; you do not know where I live. To you, I am just a young man who loved another man and realized that he cannot be the person that his family wants him to be. And he needs your help. I need your help. I am writing to you because, even though I have seen you just once, I know you are someone who can help me.

There is only one way that you can tell me that you will help me. I will come and see you again, along with the many men and women who go every Friday to listen to your wise counsel in the mosque. I ask you now to talk about homosexuality next Friday—and condemn it. Please. Condemn it. But if you mention one word, then I'll know you want to help me. One word. And when you say that word, I will come to you so that you can help me see the light. I need some guidance. I need someone. I do not want to meet the same grotesque end as Bashar and Ali.

One word...