

My Name is Osama

A short story by Sharifa Alkhateeb and Steven S. Lapham

I can't reach the top of the little apple tree any more. Me and Rayna planted it when it was just a green stick. Rayna is my grandmother. I was five years old then. I am twelve now. In the fall, these flower buds will be apples, but I won't be here to pick them.

I give old man Monsoor fifteen dinars for bread for my whole family, for our goodbye dinner. All of my cousins will be there, fifteen of them. That will be fun. And sad. I eat a flat little loaf on the way home. Nobody will care. It smells great and the birds are singing.

Walking home I stop at our best swimming spot. Our place: Qais and me. Mother says the Euphrates River is not clean, but we don't care. We strip down to our boxer shorts and jump in on hot, hot days. We sit on the rocks and make up stories about our namesakes who lived a thousand years ago. Osama was a leader of youth. He was kind and strong. My great grandfather was also named Osama. Qais, the famous one, read poetry late into the night

to his beloved, Layla. The Qais I know is a poet too. He imagines the two girls we will someday marry, and both of them are beautiful.

I am glad Rayna is still asleep this morning at our house and cannot see me listening to the water. Smelling the bread. Touching apple blossoms. She always says, "Poets die poor. Be strong like your namesake!"

It was only two weeks ago. Father has just finished building the new house and we have just moved in. I guess it stood out or something because he did not use old bricks. It is three AM and the soldiers tell my father to put up on the wall right now this slick poster of Saddam Hussein. My father does it. They search through everything in our home, messing it up with their sticks. They take the brass bowl with Mother's earrings in it. Then they leave. Father says, "Go back to bed." He has a dark bruise on his cheek.

Two weeks after the soldiers came to our house we are in Algeria. We said goodbye to our family, our friends, my school. To old man Monsoor the baker. We live in Algeria for half a year, then in France, staying in these tiny apartments. I practice my English. I'm thirteen years old and I'm very excited when our jet circles over New York City, in America, land of the free and home of the brave.

I want to hang up the photos in frames of my cousins and friends in Iraq on the wall but my father says, "No nails. Is not your wall. Is your Uncle wall." I share Mohammed's room. Mohammed is my six-year-old cousin. Father works at night in a big restaurant. We have breakfast together, and he practices his English which is not as good as Mother's. Mother works days at the drug store. "Maybe we can have an apartment of our own next year," says Mother.

Todd says, "Your mom wears a bag on her head." He doesn't know my mother has a Ph.D. in pharmacology. She taught my pediatrician at Baghdad University. Todd says, "Your father forces your mother to wear the bag on her head. Your father must be a bully." My mother wears a *bijab* because she likes to. But I don't say anything to Todd. He bugs me and says bad words. I ignore him. But then after September eleventh he gets really mean and it starts to make me really mad. What he says is this: "Osa-ma! Osa-ma! Osa-ma!"



(AP Photo/Paul Warner).

Nada Hammoud, ten, of Dearborn, Michigan, (right) holds a candle as Ahmad Kawsan, nine, also of Dearborn, who arrived straight from football practice, looks on during a candlelight ceremony for victims of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, held at the Islamic Institute of Knowledge in Dearborn on September 12, 2001.

