

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!"



IAP 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.

The hallway is crowded before lunch and Todd is with two other boys. "Hey. Osama Yo Mama," he says, "Is that dynamite under your shirt? Your mother wears a hood because she is a terrorist. Your mother is a terrorist." Something breaks in me and I turn around and push Todd hard and he falls against the locker and sits on the floor and a thin line of blood is on his upper lip. I look for the other two boys to come at me with their fists but they just stand and stare. At me. The hallway has stopped moving and everybody nearby is quiet.



Mr. Allen looks at me hard from across his desk. He is quiet for a time and then says, "Fights are not tolerated in this school. The consequence of fighting on school property is suspension. Several students have said that Todd did not even touch you." He pauses. "Do you want to tell me what happened today?"

Suspension. I wonder how my parents will punish me for putting this shame on the family. My father's family, my uncle's family. My cousins in Iraq will hear of this. Osama goes to America, gets into trouble. Shame on the family name.

The door of the principal's office opens a bit and Mr. Bagley, the hall monitor, sticks his head through. I stand up out of respect. It is a habit. "Please sit down," says Mr. Allen. "No weapons," says Mr. Bagley. Oh! They checked my locker for weapons!

The door closes. I can't be silent any more. I shout, "Todd says Osa-ma! Osa-ma! He calls me greaseball! He says my mother

is a terrorist. It is not a rag, it is not a bag, it is called a *bijab*! My mother wears a *bijab*!"

Mr. Allen looks at me for a long time. Then his chair turns and he looks out the window. The window is open. It is quiet because everybody is in class. The ropes on the flag pole go slap, slap, slap. Sounds like a ship.

Mr. Allen turns back. He says, "Osama, I must suspend you for two weeks. But I will talk to Todd and his parents and the other two boys and their parents." He reaches across the desk and touches with two fingers this small glass soccer ball.

"It must be tough having a first name like Osama. With everything that's been happening in the news, I mean. Osama, my grandfather's last name was not Allen. It was Alfirevich. He changed it to Allen to make it sound more English. More American. But sometimes I think about changing it back." Mr. Allen smiles, "Just to honor my grandfather."

The door opens. The secretary says, "His father is here." I stand up. My cheeks are wet but I am not crying any more. 🌧

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Teen Lingo, Post 9-11

"Hey, terrorist!" Sometimes the same word said by a friend as a joke feels very different when coming from a stranger, or someone you barely know.

American teens who call each other "Osama" as a nick name are probably not intending to trivialize terrorism, but are trying to take away some of the horror of recent events. Arab American students who occasionally use such nicknames may also be trying to dampen some of the sting of prejudice aimed at them in the form of these same words.

Underneath the adolescent bravado, the boast that these words can't hurt you, there is "really a tremendous fear that everything can hurt you," says Alan Lipman, executive director of the Center at Georgetown University for the Study of Violence. The center is performing research on how young people are accommodating to the aftermath of 9-11. Rough jokes can help people survive a difficult situation. This was a theme in the popular TV show *M.A.S.H.* Part of the message of such humor is that bad times will not last forever.

Source: Emily Wax, "In Times of Terror, Teens Talk the Talk," *The Washington Post* (March 19, 2002): A1.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What did Osama enjoy about his country of origin, Iraq?
2. Why do you think Osama's family left Iraq?
3. What were some of the difficulties facing Osama's family members as new immigrants to America?
4. Why did Todd's verbal bullying increase after September 11, 2001?
5. Why do you think the principal, Mr. Allen, told Osama about his own grandfather?