

# Just Like You

*by Tommy Cheis*

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The electricity was off again. Muhammad Jihad could not nap on a stifling afternoon that converted the Jihad house into an oven. He sat on a prayer mat with Bear and Tyrannosaurus Rex, pretending he and his charges were flying a carpet in outer space, not in a bedroom strewn with toy trucks, soldiers, and books about kung fu and trauma medicine. What looked like a picture of Big Bird, contemporary art, and photographs of ancestors were really planets, asteroids, and stars. After dinner, his vegetables finished, he looked forward to his weekly television hour.

Aunt Latifa was a fundamentalist, but her zealotry focused on advancing tarbiya—the upbringing of children. Although the Jihads were nominally Muslim, there were no prescribed prayer times, no overt demonstrations of belief, no hajj, no fasting. Although Latifa enforced scrupulous adherence to what is common and good in all religions, in practice the edges of the One True Faith were rounded off in service to her private gods: Knowledge and Family.

Thus, if almost-three-year-old Muhammad could not demonstrate the requisite mastery of his assigned math, science, and philosophy lessons, then his evening leisure would be limited to listening to Latifa accompany, by piano, a shaysh baysh battle with his cousin, Lutuf. Either way, when he got in bed, Latifa would read classics to help the boy fall asleep as had been her wont since he was in the cradle.

When the raised voices of Latifa and Lutuf penetrated the wooden door to his room and knocked the boy back to earth, he gathered his stuffies and crawled under his covers. But Muhammad heard every word.

“Anta majnoun, Lutuf!”

“Every messenger gets called crazy or a liar if his message threatens the orthodoxy.”

“But you’re getting worse! You sketched exploding buses and dead Israelis as a child! Then you said 9/11 was an inside job! Then you blamed Israel! Now you say it was martyrdom! Let’s go to a doctor! Your thinking is dangerous!”

“Prisoners think dangerous thoughts. All of Gaza is a prison.”

“Then make us free with your brain! Finish your degree and go to law school!”

“With what laws could I make Israel return our land and respect our rights, Mom? Law’s a charade, particularly the international variety.”

“Then join the Student Union! Or run for National Council!”

“What has political talk done for us? Are we better off than in 2000? 1967? 1948? No. We’re sliding down a greased pole into a sewer.”

“So our leaders are terrible. Why not run for office yourself?”

“Mom, I don’t want that curse.”

“Then you don’t want peace.”

“Not without justice first.”

“If you must fight, the pen’s the most powerful weapon! Not the sword or the bomb!”

“So sayeth Muhammad, Peace Be Upon My Cousin.”

“Your pain must be intolerable. You’re traumatized.”

“Why must I bear this load?”

“It was given to you by God.”

“Spare me the fairy tales, Mom. God can turn me into sand for all I care. Meanwhile, here are some interrogatories for him. Dear God, what will tomorrow bring? Why can’t things be normal? Why is there an Israeli tank around every corner?”

“The sooner the IDF leaves the better, but any Arab army would be far more brutal. Not every Israeli reaction is a massacre despite Al-Jazeera.”

“Then why, at every checkpoint, do I visualize them doing to me what they did to Muhammad’s parents and my father?”

“Doctors can help cure your problem.”

“It’s too late.”

“What about raising a family?”

“No offense, but family’s not my destiny.”

“A good woman then. Seventy-two virgins are too many.”

“What woman would want what I’ve become?”

“Lutuf, you can’t make decisions about your future in your condition.”

“I’ve never thought as clearly as I can now.”

“Don’t tell me Fate has determined you’ll die by your own hand. You have free will!”

“Fate and free will are figments of your imagination, Mom. Reality imposes harsh constraints. I have little money or time. Facts are stubborn. All that’s mine is a difficult decision.”

“And through your distorted perceptions, you’ve made the worst choice possible! To be young and give up on life is unnatural! Why not wage jihad with ideas?”

“I am, by acting in their service.”

“Why are you so obsessed with death and killing?”

“Show me a Palestinian man who isn’t.”

“The few who deal in it inflict great wrongs upon innocents. True heroes don’t run from challenges. They face them. Saving life is the highest caliber of human action.”

“I’ll die so six million Palestinians might live. Call it an act of salvation.”

Latifa wrang her hands. “Suicide’s cowardice. Not heroism.”

“Shush. Our ancestors hear your historical revisionism. Imagine Sergeant Firas Jihad, that hoary freedom-fighter against Turkish oppression. If he knew his great-granddaughter posthumously adjudicated him a war criminal, he’d spin in his grave.”

“Lutuf, every tombstone erodes. Every martyr’s poster falls. Every graffiti splotch is repainted with the same exhausted slogan when the next fool tries to achieve in death what he couldn’t in life. There’s no glory.”

“I care only about justice and family. So I’ll fight Israel the only way I can, on the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth principle.”

“Thus the world winds up blind eating porridge. How tragic. Jews, Muslims, and Christians are cousins. We lived in peace once, and could again, but your bomb will make things worse.”

“If someone broke into this house, would you serve coffee and wash his feet? Suppose, by some miracle, I wound up in a house with a wife. If my cousin threw me out and raped her, I’d hate him too, and my thoughts would run to murder.”

“Hate is self-destructive. All the more reason to love—starting with yourself.”

“Also Sprach Narcissus.”

“Killing to advance any political position is wrong. Why undo in an instant what took me nine months to create?”

“Sorry, Mom.”

“Do you think the Israelis will surrender after your istishhad?”

“No. But a vast desert is made from tiny grains of sand.”

“I’ll report you to Shin Bet.”

“I’ll say goodbye to my cousin.”

Footsteps trod closer. A trio of soft knocks.

Muhammad opened the door. “You promised not to abandon me,” he reproached Lutuf, who stood in the frame. “Why did you lie?”

“When you’re older, you’ll understand.” Lutuf took the boy’s hand, led him to the bed, and helped him into his lap. “You see, the Jews get to go to schools and offices and have families without worrying about being killed.”

“I know. But Auntie says some Jews are good guys.”

“One or two.”

“So your bomb only kills bad guys?”

Lutuf said nothing.

“This is a bad idea,” Muhammad said, then parroted the advice he received whenever he stood on the cusp of a preventable bad decision. “Stop and think about it.”

“I have, since I was your age. I’m sorry, habiby. I’ve chosen to walk this path.”

“Are you scared?”

“He who’s not afraid of death is crazy.”

The boy threw Bear across the room. “What will happen to me if you go? Wait. Nothing can kill you, right?”

“Oh, but no one is eternal on this earth.” From the wall above Muhammad’s bed, Lutuf took a framed, sepia-toned photograph of their uniformed great-great-grandfather, Firas Jihad. “Look, Muhammad. What do you see?”

“He was a hero, so he wasn’t afraid.”

“Wrong. He knew death was a good possibility. Even heroes are scared.”

“You’re a hero.”

Lutuf said nothing.

“Are you scared?”

“Terrified.”

Tears and snot ran onto the boy’s Superman pajama-top. He pleaded. “If I study harder, you won’t have to go. Or if I eat broccoli. Right?”

“None of this is your fault. You can’t control it.”

“It’s God’s fault, then, because God runs everything.”

“If that’s true, we have no free will and no choice.”

The boy thought about this. “Are you trying to go to Paradise?”

Lutuf laughed bitterly. “Maybe we live in Paradise already. Maybe Paradise is whatever you make it. Maybe it doesn’t exist. As to God? He’s bad, or she’s lazy, or they exaggerate. Let’s make a deal.”

The boy liked deals. Finish your spinach? Watch TV. Behave? Off to the beach. Get a perfect report card? To the zoo!

“If I get to Paradise,” Lutuf promised, “I’ll signal you. In exchange, please make better choices than I did.”

“No. I’m going to be just like you.”

“Listen,” Lutuf said gruffly. “Stay clear from politics and bombs. I give my body as a soldier so you can give your mind as a thinker and your children can give their hearts as musicians and writers. Please.”

Muhammad hurled himself at his cousin’s legs. Lutuf had to pry him off like a barnacle from a hull before slipping out the front door, driven by destiny or choice, to make things better and worse, kill good guys and bad guys, and break mother’s hearts.

Whether he reached Paradise or its antipode, none can say, but they’re still fighting over it.