Creation Story

By Bryan Schwartzman

Has anyone ever told you that your father used to go by Kevin? Hard to imagine now that Adnan Hassani, who, according to Google, is now the vice chair of the Islamic Circle of Northeast Queens, once felt so out of place that he'd declined to use his given name. But that's how he introduced himself when he sat next to me on the bleachers in ninth grade gym class.

I, a skinny Jewish kid more interested in guitar solos and chord progressions than slam dunks and setting picks, was terrified at the thought of having to step onto the basketball court and compete against the black kids who could leap above the rim. My Bayside High School uniform hadn't been washed in so long that I'd been forced to wear my Iron Maiden shirt into gym class. Your father approached me and voiced approval for my defiance of the gym uniform policy and the military-industrial complex. Though, he pointed out, Iron Maiden was a bunch of pretentious bastards whose songs were too long and who, in his estimation, missed the whole point of rock and roll.

Sweet child, forgive me if this letter jumps around; I have a tendency to do that when talking about your father. It is as if today, yesterday and tomorrow are all jumbled together in a kind of temporal dissonance. Now, have you ever wished for a moment to occur when all appears right with the universe? I'm talking about a kabbalistic, cosmic convergence when, for an instant, all the different strands of your life just make sense? Such an alignment nearly occurred when your father, long back from his tour of duty in Iraq, surprised me at my cramped office at Queens Borough Hall (so much for added, post-9/11 security) with the news that he and your mother were expecting a child.

The reason I didn't immediately express joy? Embarrassment: I hadn't yet told him that Lluba was pregnant with twins.

In my defense, my old band mate and I hadn't been communicating much since our wives debated the moral dimensions of Israel's response to Hezbollah's incursion on its northern border. That evening at the vegetarian Chinese restaurant in Bayside ended with both women on the verge of flinging sauce-covered noodles from their bowls. It seemed that this divergence had ruptured our paths forever. The friendship between the Jewish kid from Queens and the Muslim dude from Lahore--forged over a love of the *Back to the Future* movies and the New York Mets as well as a long-simmering debate between the virtues of stripped-down punk and elaborated, ornamented heavy metal--appeared over.

But that day in my office we agreed--or at least I thought we had agreed - that the gods of fertility or fate or luck or the will of Allah or Adonai or the space/time continuum had given us a

second chance. Dinner at your parents' house seemed like a good plan. What's a little argument over the Middle East conflict that a talk about pregnancy and babies couldn't cure?

Then the nausea came. I'll tell you that I'd always imagined that the sound of a woman vomiting resembled the whoaaaaaa noise that the fat kid, Chunk, made in *The Goonies*, as he's held captive by bandits. But my wife's guttural heaving was spiked with a low-pitched moan; a sound so muffled and understated it unnerved me far more than rabid screaming. I tepidly opened the bathroom door and was met with an elongated bass note. It sounded like she said "get out."

At this point in the second trimester, the worst of the nausea should have subsided, at least according to the authors of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, a text we had placed more faith in than any of the Five Books of Moses. But these two beings inside her redefined the rules by suctioning the life force right from her and, at the same time, imbuing her with an inner glow.

"I'm going to call and cancel," I said.

Lluba graduated from the bathroom floor to our worn-down couch, and a wet washcloth pressed her against her forehead, covering her eyelids. Her hair was soaked and misbehaving. She removed the cloth. I thought for a second she might fling it at me. I imagined women did such things during pregnancy. She displayed her greenish eyes, which she could wield like a sword.

"You wanted to do this. So we are going to do this." Her accent returned when she got agitated.

Lluba tells anyone who asks that she was from Russia. It's easier than explaining she had been born in the Soviet Union in what is now Tajikistan--part of an ancient Jewish community. I had imagined I'd intentionally wound my mother by marrying a non-Jew. Instead I picked Lluba,

whose picture I could very well have held up at the Free Soviet Jewry rallies my parents dragged me to.

She placed her feet on our tan carpet--stained, despite our best efforts, with vestiges of mouse waste--and sat up slowly, slumping her neck and shoulders, rotating her head with her eyes closed.

“You’re worried,” she said, “that the irrational, pregnant, Bukharian Jew that you married, that you love but still can’t quite believe you married, won’t be on her best behavior. You’re worried that I will go into a rant about the justice of Zionism; the staying power of anti-Semitism or the intransigence of the Muslim world and how the Arabs will never accept Jews in the Middle East. I won’t, even if *she* says more about the Occupation or checkpoints or Palestinian refugees or colonialism.”

Standing a few feet from her, adrift, despite the compactness of our living room, I put my hand forward like a crossing guard, as if she had no need to continue.

“People come in and out of our lives,” she said, rubbing her own temples. “How many friends from Dushanbe have I lost touch with? I think it is the idea of being friends with a Muslim, that’s what you can’t let go of.”

Hours later, after a short drive in which neither of us spoke, we arrived at your parents’ driveway as beams of late afternoon light filtered through the blooming trees. Chrysanthemums demarcated the walkway. I turned my head slowly and wondered if they’d hired a landscaper since the last time I had been at the house. Could this still be Queens? It seemed that we had

crossed an invisible border into suburban living, even though the commuter rail nearby could get you to Midtown in 25 minutes. Thoughts struck me in the belly: How were we going to have twins in a one-bedroom apartment? Could we swing anything larger, knowing that your parents' combined incomes probably doubled ours, mostly on account of your mother?

Here's a harmless, poorly kept secret: Even the most adoring husbands don't object, on occasion, to the opportunity to look upon and listen to another woman. Isn't that a reason married couples socialize? That night I looked forward to hearing your mother's voice. She'd spent the first 16 years of her life in London and I could sit and listen to her accent for hours. I found it difficult to reconcile the softness in her voice with her chosen career as an associate at a major Manhattan law firm.

"We are so happy for you," your mother said, holding her left hand behind her back, as if she were offering a greeting in a royal court.

"Yes, congratulations to the two of you as well," Lluba said a bit flatly, leaving off the traditional *B'eshea tova* she'd normally say.

Your mother stepped forward and kissed my wife on the cheek.

"Oh, you are feeling badly, aren't you?" your mother said. "Scott, why didn't you convince her to stay at home, in bed?"

"I tried," I said. "This nurse doesn't always make the best patient."

My wife shot me the kind of annoyed glance she usually reserves for private conversations.

“Either I feel like crap at home, or I feel like crap here. What’s the difference?” she said, before adding, “but the company will help.”

Your mother informed us that your father was checking on the veggie lasagna in the oven. (A less ethnic choice than I had hoped for, but the dish satisfied Lluba’s level of kosher observance.) Overhead halogen lighting revealed a glistening hallway floor. Manic Coltrane notes--your mother’s choice of music, no doubt--led the way to the open living room and kitchen.

My eyes were greeted with images of your grandparents and great-grandparents: wedding photos taken in Egypt on your mother’s side and in Lahore, Pakistan, on your father’s. In a picture from your parents’ wedding, your mother wears the traditional gharara. A bright green prayer rug stood out on what otherwise was an ordinary hardwood floor.

Your father’s vinyl copy of *London Calling*, autographed by Joe Strummer--which formerly was on display in their old apartment--was nowhere to be seen. Right next to the family photos was a framed image of your father in uniform. As a computer expert, your father rarely left the Green Zone, at least that’s what he’d told me. I had never seen a picture of him in uniform before, had never gotten him to tell me much about what he saw over there. In high school, your father, who had never completed a mile run, smoked so much it seemed he wouldn’t have the lung capacity to make it around a track.

Why did he go all gung-ho and join the army? I understood that he wanted to get back at those who attacked us, maybe even prove beyond any doubt that as an American Muslim, he had nothing to do with *them*. I knew that it wasn't just my city, my country that was attacked. It was his as well. But couldn't he just have left the whole fighting-the-terrorists thing to someone else? Couldn't someone else's friend, someone else's husband, someone else's father have made the decision to go to war?

"Hope you're hungry," your father said as he turned from the oven toward us. He wore a striped blue-collared shirt and khaki pants. "I know some of us are eating for two--make that three," he said, laughing nervously.

We all sat down on two opposing, tan microfiber couches, greeted by glasses of water and carefully arranged crudités. I wished that your father still drank alcohol. That way at least for the two of us, the meal might go faster. I dutifully asked my wife how she felt. Fine, she said, but I couldn't tell if she had answered truthfully. I wished someone would just bring up the whole Middle East thing and suggest the Israelis and Palestinians settle it with rock, paper, scissors or something.

"Are you going to have an amnio?" your mother asked, sounding a little too much like she was in a courtroom questioning a witness. We were just a few weeks ahead of your parents in this whole process.

"I'm really torn on this one," your mother added, perhaps to offer reassurance that the question wasn't a trap.

“I don’t think so,” Lluba said. “There’s something like a one in 200 chance that performing an amnio could kill the fetus. I don’t think it’s any secret that we tried to make this happen for a long time, and it just seems like such a crazy risk to take.”

“I know, it’s so tempting to want to be sure everything is alright,” your mother said.

Suddenly conversation flowed, stream of consciousness, jazz-like, for half an hour or so.

Have you ordered furniture yet? We had, but following Jewish tradition wouldn’t allow anything like that into the apartment until after the births. Have you felt the baby move yet? What did the latest ultrasound reveal? How tired do you feel? Still use the treadmill or elliptical? Planning to breastfeed or use formula? Do you know about Bella Bands? Have you ever felt anything as reassuring as listening to the heartbeat echoing from inside you?

Your father sat quietly, shoving chunks of cheese and hummus-dipped celery into his mouth. He got up and checked on dinner, then sat down and fidgeted some more. I tried to offer him a knowing look, or read what was going on with him from his eyes, but we seemed to be operating on different frequencies, maybe even different points in time. I thought we’d managed to rejoin trajectories, but I had no idea where he was heading.

“There is something I’ve wanted to ask,” your mother declared, raising her voice slightly, looking directly at me. “I have heard, and I could be wrong, that you possess the lone recording of the music of The Foul Fragrance?”

I laughed. I desperately needed to join your father in a laugh about our former selves. Perhaps, just for a moment, we could find ourselves transferred back to that adolescent state of being.

“I do,” I replied, “in an old box somewhere, on a cassette. We played exactly three shows at Nobody’s over on Northern Boulevard. It’s a Korean restaurant now.”

“I want to hear it,” your mother said, clasping her hands anxiously.

“Really, you don’t want to hear it,” my wife said. “It’s noise.”

“She’s right,” your father said, his face drawn and serious. “We really couldn’t play.”

“No, I was exaggerating,” my wife said. “You should hear it. It’s kind of fun. So much angst from such nice boys.”

Your father stood. “We had no business being up on stage,” he said. “It just seems so silly now. The truth is I’m embarrassed by it. I’m embarrassed that I ever thought it would make any kind of difference in anyone’s life if I picked up a bass guitar, played badly and screamed at the top of my lungs.”

Somehow, I didn’t mind some good fun ribbing of our music. But this earnest condemnation--it was as if your father were questioning our shared past. If we couldn’t talk about the Foul Fragrance, what was the point of carrying on this friendship?

“First of all,” I said, my throat getting sore even though I’d barely spoken, “if any of us could play, Rozina, it was your husband. He was, at least, an adequate bass player. But, more

importantly, he had something to say. Now if I had to glean a philosophy from his body of lyrics, I don't think I could. But it was about something, even if it might seem childish in retrospect: it spoke and it spoke loudly. We at least had the courage to get up there and make fools of ourselves."

Your father looked as if he were about to answer, but instead went to remove the main course from the oven.

"I think it's time we ate," he said. He wiped his forehead. He breathed heavily and his cheeks had grown red.

We sat down at your parents' glass table and I wondered how long it would stay free of cracks and scratches once you got on the move. I stared at the salad in front of me, studying the croutons and tomatoes and lettuce, not wanting to look up. The lasagna was on my plate but needed to cool. Your mother had turned off the music before we sat down. No one spoke.

Your father continued to fidget and did not look well. He excused himself in a hurry and sprinted from the table. I heard a noise that could almost pass for a death metal growl. He slammed the bathroom door, but the sobs traveled through the wall, bouncing off the hardwood floor. Your mother gasped before covering her mouth with her trembling hand. She got up from the table and we heard her open the door and go inside the bathroom. Lluba and I waited for minutes, listening to hushed voices and repressed cries. We looked at each other and wondered what we should do, whether or not we should just go back home? Were we interlopers in another family's drama or patient guests?

When they finally did emerge, the lasagna now cold, your mother held your father upright as he lumbered back to the table.

“Tell them,” your mother said accusingly. “Tell them what you have only just told me. Tell them you will not see your child born.”

“You don’t know that,” he shot back, sounding like he was prepared to make some kind of stance before slumping his shoulders weakly. “They’re sending me back, another 12-month deployment.”

He sat down and looked at me with apologetic eyes. No longer bearing her husband’s weight, your mother’s eyes widened.

“Her father’s going to miss the first year of her life,” your mother said, waving her hands wildly. It was likely too early in the pregnancy for her to know the gender of her unborn child.“She’s not going to know her father’s face. She won’t recognize his voice.”

I wanted to say that it wasn’t just a matter of missing her first year. I thought that your father could very well miss your whole life. He wouldn’t be the first father to go off to war and not return. Sure, he’s not out fighting the insurgents but a roadside RPG, mortar strike, or suicide bomb could do the trick. I said nothing.

“I have to fulfill my obligation, do my duty. I have to make my child proud. I have to earn that pride,” your father said, sounding depleted, as if he were telling your mother the same thing for the thousandth time. “There are good people over there. We have to do our best to help them.”

I couldn't stay silent anymore; this speech had gone far enough. I approached the imported table and pounded my fist on the glass, immediately feeling a jolt of pain.

"I can't believe you are still defending the war, this president. Where were the Weapons of Mass Destruction? The link to Al Qaeda? They didn't exist. They were imaginary. How many Iraqis, how many American soldiers have died because of that mistake?"

"Look, you don't understand," your father said, still sitting. "When you sign up, and you get the call to go, you go."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," I said, not bothering to look for my wife's reaction. "'If you get the call to go, you go.' What happened to 'question everything?' 'Resist authority?' Are you so eager to prove yourself as an American, to prove you're not a terrorist? What happened to you? Is this about God? Country? Why are you risking everything? For what?" I finally stopped but continued to breathe heavily, as if I'd just sprinted 100 meters.

Lluba planted the gentlest of kisses on my cheek, then said, in an almost whisper, "Enough Scotty, that's enough."

Your father quivered in his seat. Was he figuring out how to answer? Plotting to kneecap me? "I'm not defending the president," your father said. "I'm defending the country. We don't get to choose everything in life. I made a commitment and I have to live with the consequences. I have to believe that my going means something."

“Belief is a fine thing,” Lluba said quietly. “I’ve come to believe in many things and it has gotten me through much, the fall of the Soviet Union, coming to this country as a young girl speaking no English. But being alive is better. Life is the holiest thing.”

Your father stood and looked at me, but I refrained from moving toward him. He stepped closer. I braced for harsh words or even a rush of blows, but instead received his outstretched arms. The embrace wasn’t forced at all. It was as if, by squeezing me and wrapping his arms around me, for that moment, he was trying to erase the distance between us. It was as if, at least as long as the two of us held on to each other, he thought all was right with the universe.

Fatima, what happens to the soul when it departs the body? I thought of this question many times since we saw *the* Facebook post.

“It is with great sadness that we announce the birth and passing of Fatima Ghazala Hassani. She was born at 5 pounds, 11 ounces and 18 and half inches. She had Adnan’s eyes and Rozina’s nose. She was perfect. We appreciate your expressions of sympathy, but please understand it may take us some time to respond to messages as we face our shock and grief.”

I have never heard the whole story. I know the cord, your source of life, had become wrapped around your neck and the doctors were slow to recognize it. An emergency c-section might have saved you. I heard that a lawsuit was settled out of court.

Fatima, I leave this note on the earth for you on your second birthday, hoping that the wind, earth or mud doesn’t take this paper before its time, before its contents have been fully absorbed.

I didn’t want to come, but Lluba insisted. She had the strength to visit this place. We had to do something to mark the yahrzeit, she said. I had Hannah strapped to me, Lluba carried Micah. You could call it sitting shiva, but it's really not that unpleasant being here and shiva is supposed to be uncomfortable, a hardship. It’s April, and a spring breeze is sweeping across the cemetery grounds; the sky is cloudless and the sun’s rays are comforting. A flock of Canadian geese looked down upon us.

Your father has long since come home from war a second time and hasn’t returned any of my calls. The birth of our children, what was supposed to bring us together, has grown into an impassable chasm. Seeing our joy, I imagine, would be unbearable. We’ve each placed a rock on your headstone, according to the Jewish tradition. My family will stay beside you and wait a little longer.

Sometimes, I feel that if I write to you, it means that you exist, that your soul is somehow present, capable of receiving and sending messages. Fatima, if you can send a message, if your spirit has any sway over your parents, tell them that they are missed. Tell them our story can’t be over.

End

Weighty political arguments defined the post 9-11 era. I didn’t want to address the Iraq War or American policy in the Middle East in a didactic way, but rather hoped to explore how some of these issues and divisions affected people trying to maintain friendships, raise families, and build

their lives. However, the story was written not long after I had my first child and themes of pregnancy and childbirth really took over the foreground.

Bryan Schwartzman is an award-winning journalist whose work has appeared in the *Jewish Exponent*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Hadassah Magazine* and other publications. A native New Yorker, he lives in the Roxborough section of Philadelphia with his wife and two daughters. This is his first published work of fiction.