

children of a LESSER SANTA

Five years ago our correspondent, who grew up among the eight percent of Canadians who do not celebrate the holiday, had his first real Christmas. Embracing the machine is wonderful, he reports.

By Omar Mouallem

Picture my family, the Mouallems, through the bay window of our blue home as we erect our Christmas tree. It's 1998 in Northern Alberta. Snow mounts across the front lawn like arctic dunes. Icicles thrust from the gutters. My brother Ali, the tallest, has just crowned it with a star when, on the count of three, our mother plugs in the lights and the tree suddenly radiates our effervescent smiles. It would be the perfect holiday postcard if not for a few key details.

For one, there are no young children present. At 13, I'm the youngest by three years, which wouldn't be peculiar if not for the fact that it's our first Christmas tree.

But, also, it's not even Christmas. It's Ramadan, Islam's holiest month, a time for fasting, contemplation and prayer, not tinsel, jubilation and presents. Further, it's not even December. Last year, Ramadan began in July, but because the Islamic calendar moves back 11 days each year, it was late January when we put up our decorations. So to the neighbours passing by in the coming weeks, I'm sure it appeared as nothing more than a spell of laziness.

Another thing you can't see is that it's a secret. My dad was on a trip to his homeland, Lebanon, and was unaware of our brief brush with the Christian holiday. Always in his pleated pants and neat dress shirts, my dad didn't just play the part of our household's Culture Minister, he looked it, too. We celebrated Halloween and birthdays like everyone else. These got a pass. But not Christmas. It was too pervasive, too powerful, too Christian. Once you let it in through your front door, it turned your Qur'ans to Bibles, your water to wine, your halal meats into regular meats and your children white. But with him away, my sister Janine convinced our mom that it would be totally halal if we crossed party lines—*just this once*.

There's one last thing you can't make out in this postcard image. That glimmer in my eyes, my gosh-golly grin, the wistfulness practically levitating off the picture? A decade would pass before I felt that way again.

NINETY-TWO PERCENT OF CANADIANS CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS, according to an Abacus Data Poll. The other eight per cent, like my family, are often immigrants with strong religious backgrounds who probably experience the holidays from a safe distance—just far enough that they're not suspected of espionage. There were certain cultural pressures our family couldn't avoid. You can't run a business without a holiday party, for example. So my parents were sure to keep a Christmas tree (in fact, our *one* Christmas tree) in the family restaurant's storage room. The school's annual concert was encouraged, too, so long as the kids didn't play the role of John or Mary (more to do with blasphemy) and my folks weren't expected to be there (more to do with a lack of spare time). And Christmas carollers were copasetic, as long as they didn't step through the doorway.

And so we children of the eight per cent often grow up with a malformed concept of Christmas. While most Canadian children probably encounter Santa Claus within the first year of their lives—at a parade, in a mall or in their living room—I was four. My mom, perhaps noticing my sense of exclusion, or to better integrate into her adopted country, took me to the town library where families lined up to snap a photo of their children in the jolly man's lap. What could go wrong?

I'm not sure what went through her head as Santa began to ask his stock question, "And what do you want for Christmas, Little Boy?," thereby lifting my mother's commitment to an impossible level. But to me, it was a simple and easy question. I began to list off a bunch of things, real and imaginary: a Ninja Turtle toy, skates, a glove that turns into a sword, a sword that turns into a snack. As he reached into his trimmed red bag, I assumed that he was gathering my requests. Instead he handed me a single, tissue-wrapped, mandarin orange.

You're probably too old to remember what you got for your first Christmas, but if you're one of the 92 percenters, I'm willing to bet the whole of the Canadian economy that it wasn't miniature fruit.



So I did the one thing that gets you Christmas blacklisted: I pulled him by the scruff of his beard and let it snap back into place. This was met with a gasp from onlookers and a loud, unjolly yowl from Saint Nick himself. My parents were undoubtedly relieved to now have a permanent excuse for why Santa never dropped by.

CHILDREN OF A LESSER SANTA GROW UP TO HAVE A DIFFERENT OUTLOOK. They may feel a titch alien and envious. They may become petty around the holidays. I once threw a tantrum because not even McDonald's was open on Christmas Day, and if I couldn't have presents then the least I deserved was a damned Happy Meal! Even after the curtain is pulled and Santa is revealed to be little more than a credit card, it becomes no easier. It becomes harder, more personal in fact, because now forgoing Christmas is a choice—a decision *not* to indulge in what is the best holiday of the year, bar none.

Some children may overcompensate for this lack, as I did. That meant playing up for my friends of the 92 percent—which in rural High Prairie, Alta. was more like 99.9 percent—the joy of “Muslim Christmas.”

This holiday is better known as Eid Al-Fitr, and marks a new lunar cycle at the end of Ramadan. For the first few years of my life, Eid meant going to mosque and maybe getting a new sweater. Not exactly reasons for a five-year-old to leap from bed and bang on his siblings' and parents' doors at six in the morning. But upon reaching that age where one gains a concept of money, I was deemed ready for the traditional gift of cold, hard cash.

It came from all aunts and uncles, in bills blue, purple and green. All we kids had to do for it was kiss the elder on each cheek and recite an Arabic phrase: “May every year find you in good health.” I relished going to mosque on Eid morning because it meant more cheeks and more money. Even the imam ponied up, and I didn't have to sit on his lap. Plus his beard was real.

There was even a second Eid—Eid Al-Adha, sometimes called the “Greater Eid,” though, to be honest, it wasn't that great. A few bucks in my pocket, but nothing like the windfall that Eid Al-Fitr brought at the end of Ramadan. But I talked it up anyway, back at school following Christmas break. “Oh, you got a new bike? What? That's a new hat? Well, we have two Christmases, so suck on it!”

When these Eids were exact, I couldn't say: keeping time by the moon is an esoteric science. Not only does the Muslim calendar move back 11 days every year, but the specific day of Eid Al-Fitr is determined with just 24-hours'

notice based on a religious authority's observation of a new moon. I described this gentleman to my friends as a turbaned Saint Nick, peering through his telescope and then, upon affirming the new moon, pulling the lever that would shower me with cash.

Did I care about my friends' precious trees, the storybook twinkle of their houses or the TV specials relating to their lives? Very much. All television offered us during Ramadan was *The Message*, a three-hour 1977 epic starring Anthony Quinn. (On the plus side, we got all the same days off plus two more.)

Then I got older and the expectations got infinitely higher. In Islam, when one reaches puberty, one is compelled to fast during Ramadan, from sunup to sundown. No food or drink during daylight hours for a month. Even a sixth grader knows a bait and switch when he sees one.

Ramadan and the Eid celebrations that followed had become 29 or 30 days of hunger followed by a spike in my piggy-bank savings. My morale waned, just as I'm sure it had for my older brother and sister when they reached that age. Relatives tried to up the ante with pinker bills, but it didn't always work. I overheard a cautionary tale about my cousin getting caught in the linen closet with a mouthful of Big League Chew bubble gum. God knows I had my own secrets.

By 13, Eid didn't arrive with the same glee as before (which, in hindsight, was probably a good thing, my mind naturally restoring a solemn religious holiday to its rightful place). What's worse, dad was gone all month on his trip to Lebanon, meaning mom was working more at the family restaurant and the nightly dinners would therefore become the responsibility of my 17-year-old sister. Sensing our declining enthusiasm, and perhaps to make up for her inedible chili, Janine hatched a plan with our mother. “We will be doing Ramadan differently this year,” she told my brother, Ali, and me. “We will be having a Christmas Ramadan.”

A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE EID OF 1998, my mother walked into my bedroom as I was doing something private: wrapping her presents. I shoved everything under the bed like a junkie in a drug raid. She started interrogating me. “What are you hiding? Are you keeping secrets from *your mother*?” The rustling of papers, I'm sure, made her think it was a skin mag. Instead, I showed her the half-wrapped bottle of perfume. She had forgotten about Christmas Ramadan.

Obviously, it wasn't her thing, but she went along with it anyway, sweetly feigning surprise on the morning of Eid Al-Fitr and spraying on her neck a scent so cheap and strong I'm surprised it didn't tranquilize her. This came just after unpacking the stockings—

bulky knee-high socks my sister had dragged out of her closet. But we were none the wiser. The Mouallems re-enacted the studied TV Christmas specials the 92-percenters had broadcast into our living rooms for years. Sitting on the floor, in our pyjamas, surrounded by piles of wrapping paper, we passed around presents and followed each surprise with a hug. It was not just a celebration, but a simulation. My aunt, who was living with us, even gave us all socks, thereby authenticating the occasion.

Maybe my body was just coping with 30 days of starvation and dehydration, but I was overcome with that fabled holiday warmth and fuzziness. It was kind of my parents and relatives to dish out money throughout my childhood, but cash gifts are about generosity, not empathy. Presents, done well, really make you think of the people in your life. Steeped in consumerism and capitalism it may be, but gift-giving is the language of love.

The next morning I descended the stairs in my new socks, entered the living room and rubbed my eyes. The tree was gone; the only glow to speak of came from the TV. The only traces, tiny tinsel threads caught in the carpet.

TEN WHOLE YEARS WOULD PASS BEFORE I WOULD EVER HAVE ANOTHER CHRISTMAS, in any month, in any fashion, and the effect was embitterment. *Crass, vulgar, cosmetic*—I called it all these things. If you think people who say “put the Christ back in Christmas” are smarmy, imagine hearing it from a non-Christian. I was a walking Lucy van Pelt—arms flailing, nose upturned, mouth cartoonishly agape with opinions on this “commercial racket.” Co-workers put up with me only because I was pretty much guaranteed to cover their shifts around the holidays.

In that decade, Ramadan, globally, started wearing a familiar outfit. My sister now strings lights around her house and showers her kids with presents on Eid Al-Fitr, which is highly amusing to her neighbours, I'm sure (this year, they will watch her hang her lights in June). In recent years, most malls in the Middle East have started having 30-day sales and in Dubai one shopping centre sets out nativity scenes with camels and village elders. When I was growing up, I would have sold my brother for that Ramadan and Eid. But I stopped observing them years ago. I became a man without a meaningful holiday.

Until I met my wife, Janae.

Five years ago I had my first *real* Christmas. And not just any Christmas, but a Jamieson Family Christmas.

The Jamiesons are the focus group for the holidays. Lights, wreath, mistletoe, eggnog—their home in December is a check-



list of the Christmas machine my family raged against. There's even a nativity scene set out in the living room, but it's not so big as to overshadow the presents. Then again, even if there were a life-sized animatronic baby Jesus wailing in the corner of the living room, it would not deflect attention from the presents.

On my first Christmas morning, I entered to find, despite there being just four Jamiesons, 30 presents piled like windrows around the tree. And 10 stockings! “Are we expecting more family?” I asked. No, my future mother-in-law explained. Two were for the living cats, Buffy and Ptolemy, two were in memory of the deceased cats, one was for my

own cat at home and the last one?

“It's for you,” she said.

I have felt the softness of a real stocking around my arm now. I have sat around a tree and opened a mystery gift from “Santa.” I have gulped rummy eggnog to a Mariah Carey Christmas. It is hokey, and it is wonderful.

The holiday spirit infected me and spread to my extremities. It's evident in my wintry cheer, my presents for the neighbours, my sing-songing well into spring. I am five in Christmas years and it shows. I now erect my own tree a full month before my in-laws—not that it's a competition or anything. I have participated in this capitalistic orgy, spent thousands on presents and become the very person I once abhorred, but I don't care. I love Christmas.

However, until recently, it was becoming my deepest, darkest family secret. I have broken plenty of sensitive news to my parents, but the hardest was coming out of the Christmas closet.

Two Decembers ago, I invited them over amid our glimmering tree and dangling stockings above the crackling fire, and I confessed to them that the holiday they tirelessly taught their children to believe was a “them/not us” thing, was now a “me” thing. I explained to them that Christmas belongs to all of us—Christians, Muslims, atheists, *Canadians*.

Eight-percenters can still cherish Ramadan, Hanukkah or their cultural holiday of choice, but the modern Christmas is non-denominational (sorry, Christians). And we, the eight-percenters and 92-percenters alike, can all partake in it.

I freely admit that the Christmas I love is the consulting-firm Christmas, with tens of thousands of PR people, interior decorators and CEOs at the heart of the machine, paid to maintain and grow it. And though the machine is not flawless, it makes me feel great, so why fight it? The decked-out streetlamps and office parties, the cashier with the Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer schnoz, the “White Christmas” piano instrumental on the Safeway speakers—if these have given you even a modicum of pleasure, then you too must admit that you're part of the machine. ☺