

## If You Invite an International Student Home for Thanksgiving ...

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This essay is written from a perspective of a former student who invited her classmate home with her for Thanksgiving when she was an undergraduate.*

IF YOU ARE PLANNING TO INVITE AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TO YOUR HOME for the holidays, allow me to warn you. Your invitation, offered in the name of cross-cultural solidarity and holiday cheer to some upstanding young man or woman with a charming accent and in need of a home-cooked meal, could lead to an unprecedented chain of events, after which you may never be the same.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

Your car might break down at 11:00 p.m. on the highway somewhere between campus and your parents' house, stranding you and the international student at a gas station. You may pass the time playing Frisbee and learning Arabic greetings in the deserted parking lot as you wait for the tow truck and your mom and dad to arrive.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

You might learn on the drive that he single-handedly found families to host all the other international students in need of a place to stay over the holiday weekend so that he could be the only one accompanying you. "You'll love Miami," the international student may have told the music major from Myanmar who has always wanted to go to Nashville, where your family just happens to live.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

Your family may take him along on their day-before-Thanksgiving tradition of pancakes and hash browns at Shoneys, and your dad may try to convince the international student (and almost succeed) that

if they sing "Tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the breakfast bar is free.

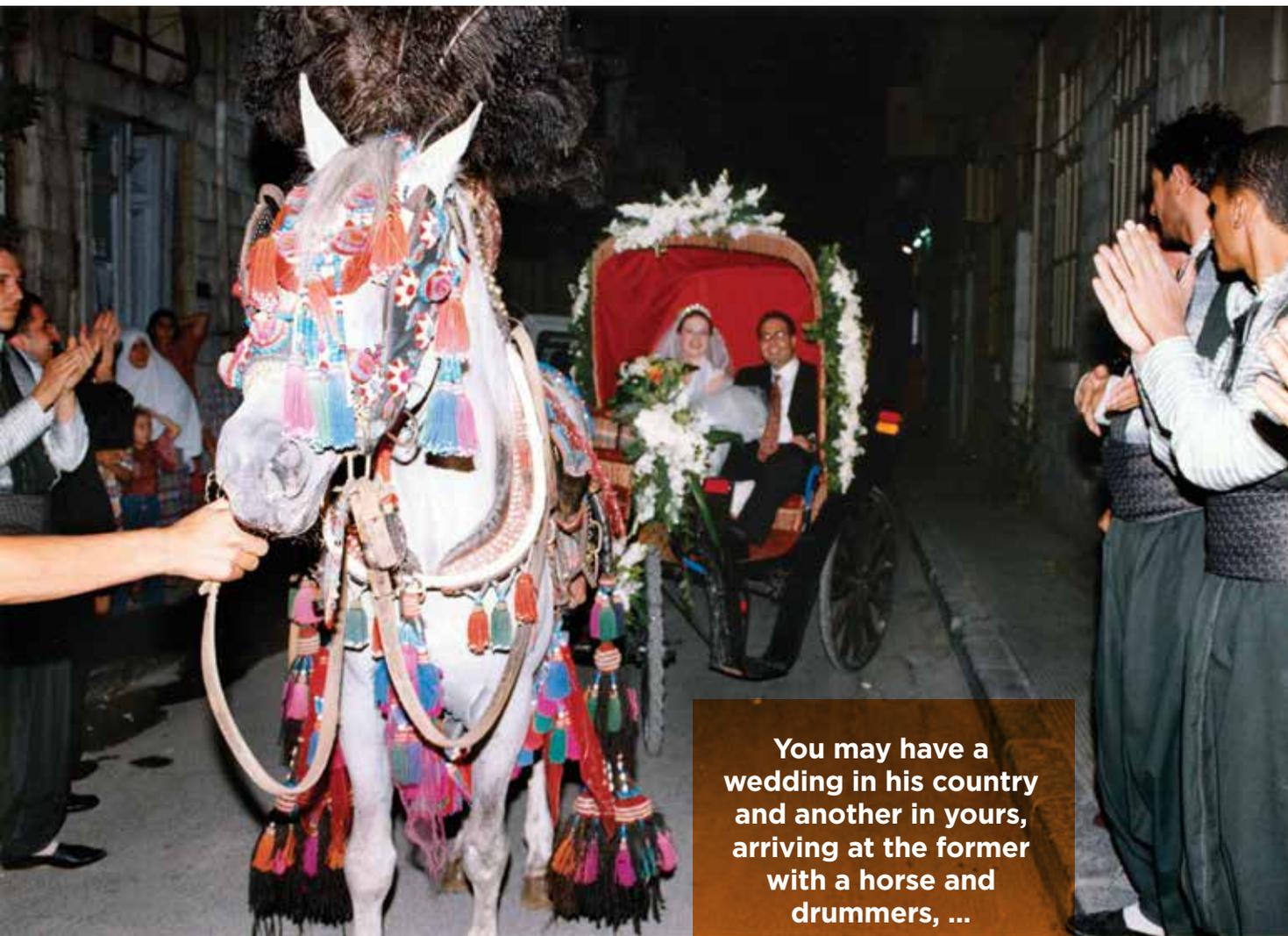
*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

He may kneel when he meets your grandmother who has Alzheimer's and never made it far from Alabama. The international student may take her hand in his and tell her he is from Damascus, "like in the Bible," which may prompt one of the few smiles she will give all year. You may not realize he is watching as you paint her fingernails to the marching band sounds of the Macy's parade and your mom shuffles casserole dishes from the oven to the table, but the international student may tell you years later that was the moment he fell in love.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

He may ask to come back at Christmas, and you may prepare a basket for the guest room with cookies and hotel shampoos, causing your mom to say, "You *really* like this boy." You may deny it, but then return to campus after New Year's and tell your roommate over a box of Fudge Stripes you think this international student could be the one.





**You may have a wedding in his country and another in yours, arriving at the former with a horse and drummers, ...**

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

The international student may become your best friend despite the language barriers. He may laugh at your southern accent, and you may tease him for confusing his “B”s and “P”s but secretly love the way he calls the bug in your dorm a “cookaroche.”

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

He may ring the doorbell at your student apartment, then run away to watch you find the giant jar of olives he left. The international student may introduce you to Arabic coffee and teach you to crack pumpkin seeds with your teeth, and you may say they go better with iced tea. Your pants may shrink a size or two as you realize the heartfelt tenacity of Middle Eastern hospitality and the futility of resisting appetizers and desserts.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

You may take a bike ride a year later, just weeks before graduation, and stop to rest under a gazebo, where the international student may pull a nursing textbook

from his backpack and say he wants to show you something to help your irritable bowel syndrome. You may turn to the suggested chapter and find a hole carved in the pages, hiding a ring box. You may remember how the international student said on your second date that you are like a wild bird that should never be caged, and you may say yes, despite your fears.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

You may be surprised, both good and bad, by the reaction of others. A customer at the coffee shop where you work may say that the international student is marrying you for the green card and another may ask if you’ve seen *Not Without My Daughter* and warn you’ve no idea what you’re getting into. Your boss, though, may hire the international student, paying him a fair wage to make cappuccinos despite his lack of a work visa.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

Your mom, who has grown to like this international student but worries, may ask, “Wouldn’t life be easier with a boy from up the street?” You may think

of the boy from up the street who buried your My Little Ponies in the mud and say, "Not really."

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

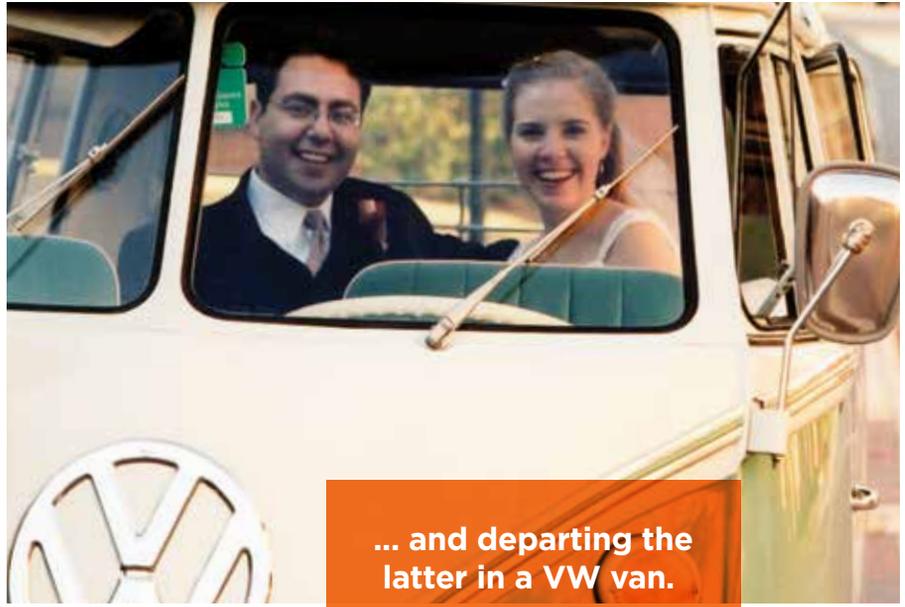
The international student may not tell you his mother makes an international call every day begging him not to marry this American. He may not tell you until after you've flown across the world to meet his family and won their hearts honestly. Even then, you may suspect it was really your orange polka-dot pajamas that charmed your future mother-in-law, but you'll take it.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

You may have a wedding in his country and another in yours, arriving at the former with a horse and drummers, and departing the latter in a VW van. You may still laugh years later at how he balked in Birmingham at throwing the garter from your thigh to a pack of unwed men, or how you were up 'til dawn in a Damascus hotel room dismantling the zealous work of the hairdresser while the international student plucked fake lashes from your khol-lined eyelids.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

Your family gatherings may become much more entertaining. The international



student may make your mom spew her drink when he misses the subtle difference between devil and deviled and asks her to pass the "Satan eggs." She may make it her personal duty to remedy his dislike of ham, but she'll still add a turkey to the table each Christmas especially for him.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

The years may fly by and you may forget what it was like to not be subject to "ran-

dom" security checks or the worry that comes with having family far away in a place of unrest. The sharp edges of your cultures may wound each other unintentionally and at times take you by surprise. But you will not forget, even as the years fly by, that the harmony is richer because of the struggles and that that faraway place is now a part of you too. You will learn together which of the sharp edges deserve to be blunted and which ones to keep as they are...but to handle with care.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

You may watch his mother and yours, who don't speak each other's languages, laugh as they sled down a hill holding on to one another, and you will know that some things are stronger than cultures or words.

*If you invite an international student home for Thanksgiving:*

It may, of course, lead to nothing at all. It may simply mean another place setting at the table, another slice cut from the pumpkin pie, another friendly face in the shuffle of passing plates and giving thanks.

But the thing is, you never know. **IE**

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