

The bell rings and kids walk into Mr. Madina's Honors iii classroom. "Okay kids; listen up. I have something I want to read to you."

When I first walked inside the narrow smelly hallway of apartment number four, I knew I was getting myself into something I would completely regret. The smell of curry, Indian food, Thai food, and any other foreign food you could think of burnt my nostrils. It made me sick to my stomach. Right then and there I wished I could just turn around and walk out. Hesitantly, I knocked three times lightly on the nicely decorated door. I stared at the sign that said in big cursive letters "WELCOME." I chuckled. I don't know why I did. It was funny to me. Since when were the people of the Islamic religion welcoming to a person like me? An agnostic. They pray seven or eight times a day to a God and I play video games and seldom say grace at the dinner table. Don't get me wrong; I am a believer. However I don't necessarily fit the image of a true Catholic. I can think of numerous times where I skipped church to play baseball and when I consumed meat on Fridays during Lent. Before my knuckles even got the chance to touch the door at fourth time, a half-bald, middle-aged man flung it open. His eyebrows were scrunched together as he was confused. A faint voice behind him says something in a language that I wanted to laugh at. I smirked and looked to the side to hide the fact that I was curling my lips in from laughing at the insanely ambiguous form of speaking I just heard. The man stared and gestured me in. Then pointed at my shoes saying, "Take your shoes off," in an annoyingly Indian accent. I knelt down to untie my sneakers and mentally scolded myself for getting into this situation in the first place.

If I had just listened to Mr. Madina that day, maybe I haven't have to be here. I was doing the usually thing in his English Honors iii class. Writing, I write stories that I hope to publish some day. Lost in thought, I wasn't even listening to what Mr. Madina was dictating to the class. My thoughts were interrupted by the girl in front of me, Rachel. Her hand was brandishing in front of my face as if she were trying to get my attention. Realizing that I was probably in trouble, I looked up and met eyes with the whole class also including Mr. Madina and found him saying, "Well Max, since you are eager to be informed about this program we are holding in our school how about you be the first volunteer?" I started to say something but the bell rang and the period was over. "All right kids remember to read chapters twelve to twenty by Monday remember to keep working on your paper due in exactly in two weeks from today. Have a nice weekend," Mr. Madina yelled out while using his eyes to imply that I should get up and go talk to him.

As my classmates cleared out, I grabbed my books and approached Mr. Madina. He explained me all of the things required for the program we are holding at our school. "Here in New Jersey, we support diversity and accept it every step of the way. This program is called Exchange For A Change and it requires students to go into families' homes and live there to experience the different cultures all around them. It is a great opportunity and I

really think you'd enjoy it. It's completely voluntary; however, it can hurt your grade if you don't show any effort to try."

I hated it when he did that. He tells me I have a choice but then adds a consequence to it. "Fine, when do I start?"

"Max, I know you are a smart kid. But I also know your views on multi-cultural families are...narrow. Please try your hardest to behave yourself. No funny business. It starts this weekend and you're there for two weeks." He looked at me straight in the eye.

Oddly enough, I respected the guy and I knew where he was coming from. So I replied, "Okay, give me the family and the address and I'll be there. I won't let you down." Mr. Madina also explained to me we all would have to keep a short personal journal on our experiences there. He told me he was grading the journals, so I can't slack off.

As I walked inside the house with no shoes I introduced myself. "Hi, Max Levy and I'm part of the Exchange For A Change program that's been held for us juniors every year. It's a program that I---

"He knows who you are. He just looks confused sometimes because he can't speak English too clearly. But most of the time he knows what's going on." She took out her hand for me to shake it. "Hi, I'm Farah." I shook back. Her hands were soft. Her olive skin glowed from the sunlight shining in from the opened windows. Her hair was black, long and straight. Her eyes were a simple brown. And she was smiling. She was beautiful. Farah showed me around the apartment and led me to my room. It was too big and good size for an apartment. Everything was tidy and had a unique style to it. I liked it and I liked her. However, she became sort of fresh with me towards the end of the tour. And it seemed as if she was bothered by something. When I asked her if something was wrong, she answered blatantly with no. I wonder why she was mad, but at the same time I didn't really care.

The first week there I was annoyed about a lot of things. I found out that the family wasn't Indian. It was from a small country in Asia called Bangladesh. I didn't know such a place existed, but it was there. There were so many diminutive rules to follow. I had a curfew for ten o'clock. I learned how to pray. I had to turn the television and music off during pray time. I wasn't allowed to sing or rest my hand on my cheek at the dinner table. I wasn't allowed to eat pork. It wasn't haram. I actually got chastised for saying, "You mean kosher, right?" I thought they were the same thing. But I learned that being a Jewish person and an Islamic person are two different things.

My "fake parents" names were Riaz and Nazreen. Riaz was pretty cool. He seemed hard-headed first when he greeted me the first day but he lightened up and turned out to be an

okay guy. He was my buddy to watch baseball with because we surprisingly shared the same interest in the Mets. Who know a family like them would sit down and watch baseball together? All I thought they did was pray five times a day. Yeah, it's five, not seven or eight.

There were two kids in the house. Farah and Khaleed. Farah was my age. Khaleed was seven. The kid was all right. Strangely, he looked up to me as a big brother, and we played video games together. Nazreen would cook for us every day. Dinner time was the best. I never thought I'd love the food but I did. The disgusting smelling curry turned into a couple of my favorite meals. I loved knowing that I could come home from school to be greeted with happy people and delicious on the dinner table. It was rejuvenating.

The second there flew by real fast. I was upset that it had to end so quickly. I went into this program thinking that I would be bored and uninterested. I wasn't eager to learn about new cultures and new religions. I liked staying in my little box. But Exchange For A Change changed my aspect in thinking. All my life, diversity has been knocking on door and this year for the first time ever I opened the door and let it in. It's important to experience different things in life. Kids my age every day are complaining how simple, consistent, and boring their lives are. If they had just taken the chance to just turn around and acknowledge their classmates around them get to know them then maybe they wouldn't have to complain so much. Living with this family for two weeks has opened so many doors for me. I conversed with my fellow peers on how they felt about their two weeks spent in those homes, and they had the same answers as I did. Everything was new, interesting, and out of the ordinary. Everything kept my ears listening, my taste buds buzzing, and my attention at the highest level. And I'll shout it out to the world. Diversity is about acceptance and I'll embrace it forever.

One day after school, I saw Farah walking outside of my school. I wondered why she was there. She had one of those hijabs on around her head that women in the Islamic religion wear to hide their hair from men who would stare at them. An odd religious thing if you ask me. It covered her stunning hair. I approached her and questioned her then I saw she had books in her hand. She answered, "I go to this school. I was in two of your classes last year." She walked away and I stared at her. There was this queasy and uneasy feeling at the pit of my stomach. I felt guilty. For three years she's been in my school, and I hadn't even noticed her.

Max Levy's words echoed in every one of Mr. Madina's students' ears. "I read this journal to my classes every year and hopefully this program will have the same affect on all of you as it did to Max Levy. Now, let's begin."