

Cultural Exposure

It was the 10th hour of April 15th, 2000. My dad was coming to America in an Airplane. He was also coming to terms with the gay guy next to him. Or so he thought. The man kept staring at him, as if taking a mental inventory of my dad's look: the brown face, the thick accent, and the thicker beard. And then came dinner. It was freshly made egg omelets with a side of cajun rice in a small white bowl. The bowl was polished, and sparkled against the flare of the sun. It was ready for a taking. And so my dad took. He took well. His hands dove headfirst into the rice, scrounging whatever came to bay. Unknown to the allegedly gay man, eating with one's hands was custom in Bengali culture. But something happened. Every time my dad took a serving, the man grew redder. And redder. And redder. Until he exploded! "Stop eating like a damn cow!" My dad also exploded. In relief. The guy wasn't gay! He was only racist! As common in Bengali culture, my dad was taught to hate gay men and women. But now, he was relieved the man who'd stared at him for most the flight was not gay. My dad found comfort. He wouldn't have to change his seat. All he had to do was stop eating with his hands. Logically, my dad didn't eat for the next 18 hours. Once the plane landed, my dad went to ask *his* dad: "How do Americans eat, father?" My dad's dad responded gravely, "Those Americans! They eat with silver cutlery: Forks, Knives, Spoons, and Shovels!" "Shovels!" my dad exclaimed. "Shovels." my dad's dad confirmed.

Alas, the scene became much darker in 2016, just a year after gay marriage was legalized in the US. Omar Mateen killed 50 gay men in Pulse Nightclub, Orlando Florida. It was the deadliest attack since 9/11. My dad realized. He reflected. And he thought. He realized what he was taught

when he was young was all wrong. Gay people weren't any less human than the rest of us! The day after the shooting, my dad, my older brother and I held a poster remembering the men who lost their lives on June 12, 2016. We stood in Washington Square Park -- the campus of my dad's Alma Mater NYU -- holding the poster for hours on end, remembering the lives lost and praying it would never happen again. I still remember the seven words from the poster: "I am Muslim and I love Gays."