Nicholas Pell
International 2060
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Becoming the "Other":

Dear Nicholas,

Thank you for your request to be pen pals. I am Ahmed Heshkebah bin Chadi Malikh al Rehul Saif al Rahman (Ahmed Heshkebah, son of Chadi, King of the nomads, Sword of the Merciful). I was born in Dodge City, Kansas in 1972 to Chadi and Kishad Heshkebah. My parents came to the states two years before I was born. They are from Yemen. The North Yemen Civil War lasted from 1962 until 1970. My family, as well as many other Yemenis refugees, moved here in search of a better life. They sought a life free from the constant turmoil in their native Yemen. When my father was in Yemen he was a carpet salesman. When he and my mother came here, however, no one wanted carpets. He was forced to learn the farmer's trade. He became a corn and potato farmer.

When I was young, my father taught me about proper planting and irrigation techniques. I, too, learned to be a potato farmer. While growing up, I was sent to elementary school in southern Dodge City. Mrs. Smith, my first grade teacher, was unable to pronounce my name on the class roster, so she decided to give me a *nickname*—"Johnny." She said that it would help the other children associate with me better. I hated that name. Even though I was born here in the states, the Americans see me as an Arab—an outsider. I was born here too. Why don't they accept me as their brother?

I attended school until I was sixteen years old. My father got sick and I had to stay at home to care for the farm. I dropped out of high school and dissolved all hopes of being a scientist. I was smart enough to attend college, but my mother needed me at home. I was the

man of the house after my father died. I had to care for my mother. Around this same time, my mother found Fatima. According to Islamic tradition, my mother arranged for Fatima and me to be married. Fatima and I became good friends. She and I were happily married a few years later.

On Fridays we go to al Hassan Mosque on the corner of Lincoln and Second Avenue. There is a small Muslim community where we live. Among them, I am Ahmed and I am a respected farmer. Five times a day I roll out my prayer rug, face it toward the east (toward Mecca) and recite chants in praise to Allah. We enjoy our Malokhiya (soup) and flat bread. At home, when it's cold outside, we sit on the floor in the living room and sing. My wife is the chant leader and I am the one who plays the shubbabah (flute). We laugh together and show tribute to our ancestors who have passed on before us. They are in the arms of Allah. They look after us, so we must show gratitude for them. We chant their names. This is good practice for us to remember them—all of them. I feel a connection with my ancestors, even though I have never met them.

According to Sharia Law, we must abstain from eating pork products of any kind. It is dirty. It is unholy. To consume it is to sin against Allah. For this reason, I have never had bacon alongside my toast and eggs in the morning before tending to the fields. My friends and neighbors laugh when I tell them that I don't consume the dirty pig. I kindly explain that Allah has commanded it, so my family and I faithfully obey. We are no longer invited to the *Annual Dodge City Bacon Cook-Off*. Those Americans stuff their faces with dirty, greasy pork and play their hillbilly games. I am an Arab. I do not belong. What if I wanted to learn to play "Horse

shoes" or how to run a race while confined to a potato sack? I feel excluded and alienated for my "differences."

We don't have a lot of money. If we're lucky, the harvest will be plentiful and we will have an excess after paying toward the mortgage on the farm. Most years we must rely on our own crops of potatoes and corn in order to survive. We don't have money to buy Jiffy peanut butter and Smucker's fruit jelly. We do not shop at American Eagle or the GAP. Neither of these places sells our native Yemenis robes. Instead, we must make our own clothing. What a privilege and luxury it would be to buy prepared clothing and not have to worry about sewing it by hand. Besides, their plaid flannel shirts and tight blue jeans look too uncomfortable for me. I wear a traditional keffiyeh (headscarf) on my head and loose cotton robes which protect my skin from the harsh Kansas sun. My robe allows my skin to breathe and keeps me cool. However, when I go to Wal-Mart, the passersby look at me and lower their eyebrows. Every day I am reminded that to look like an Arab automatically makes me a terrorist—at least in their eyes. You would not imagine the scowls Fatima and I get when I lean toward her and whisper, "Au hebik" (I love you), and she responds, "Au hebak" (I love you [too]). They take one look at us and we inevitably become "those people who bombed the World Trade Center." For this reason, I must try to speak English in public, because if I don't, suspicious eyes stare at me as though I am planning my next attack. Many times a week people shout obscenities at us from their cars as they speed by. They call me a "rag head." It hurts. I do not cry though, at least in public, because it is not masculine to do so.

About a year ago, Fatima gave birth to our son. We named him Malikh (King). He has beautiful tan skin and adorable brown eyes. He's a happy baby, but I constantly worry about

his future and how he will be treated when he grows up. Will they call him a "rag head" too? All I want is for him to be happy. I, like most fathers I have met, would do anything—anything to protect my precious boy. I cannot, however, protect him from their criticizing eyes. He will not be a potato farmer. I will send him to the university. He will get an education and take care of Fatima and me when we grow too old to care for ourselves. Our baby is our future, our legacy, our gift from Allah.

Thank you, Nicholas, for writing to me and caring to hear about my life. I hope to meet you some day. I will invite you to my house for dinner one Friday night. I wish you well with your studies and your career. Until next time, may the blessings of Allah be with you.

Sincerely,

-Ahmed

Building the bridge:

Dear Ahmed,

Thank you for accepting the invitation to become my pen pal! I must say that I am truly inspired by your story and courage to withstand the hardships that you face daily. I am blown away by the relationship you have with you wife and son. I, too, am a citizen of the United States and do not understand why people, such as yourself, are treated as "outsiders." I have not, however, experienced the oppression and hatred from my community to the extent that you have. I have, for my entire life, attempted to understand why people are excluded and marginalized for their differences. I only wish to say that I am sorry for the negative experiences that you have had which have led you to have such negative feelings toward

Americans. I can assure you though, that there are some of us, such as myself, who embrace diversity and love who you are.

I am currently attending a community college in Utah. I will be completing my major in International Studies with an emphasis on business and Spanish this coming fall. Through my studies, I have dedicated my life to learning about cultures, languages, and the power of privilege in different societies. I remember reading a short story called "All-American Slurp." It tells of a Chinese-American family trying to "fit into" American culture. The family is invited to their neighbor's house for a dinner party. While sitting with the other guests, they decide to peel the strings from the raw celery before eating it. This is what is "normal" to them, but the other guests simply stare at them and offer confused expressions which seem to question "what planet are you guys from?" The family feels so "different" from everyone else. The young girl in the story is especially embarrassed and even expresses being ashamed of her heritage and her "difference." Her family *was* different from the other families at the party, but that doesn't mean that it was *bad*. After reading your letter, I sensed that you might feel similarly.

I grew up here in America too. When I was younger, I was taught to judge people because of the way that they looked. If they had tattoos, they were gang members. If a man wore eyeliner, he was gay. If a man wore a "rag on his head," he was an Arab. The latter always had a very negative connotation. I have had to purposely push myself to overcome those things which I had learned in early adolescence. I was taught to hate those who were "different." I did so, but didn't know why. This reminds me of another poem that I have read called, "St. Roach." The author wrote about the reasons why she never learned about the other

people. She mentions that she "cannot speak or read their language or sing their songs" (Rukeyser). She was simply taught to hate their differences, and did so. However, when she decided to let go of her misinformed perceptions, she began to learn of them and know about them. I think that the United States is in the process of doing this very thing. We are beginning to open up to people and their differences—and finding out that they're not that bad after all.

I am white and am male. For these reasons, I tend to "fit in" to society—for the most part. America is a country in which the white man is very privileged. I do not have to explain myself when I walk into the store and am questioned whether I need help. I am not looked at funny because of the clothes I wear, or because of the language I speak. I, as a white male, am given the privilege by society to essentially do as I please without fear of being questioned. This is where you and I differ. I never chose to be white and male. You never chose to be of Arab descent. However, I am given many more privileges than you, simply on the basis of how I look and talk. I don't agree that this is fair or just, but the paradox in this situation is that, although I never asked for the privilege, it was given anyway—I can't "give it back." Allan Johnson discusses this very thing in his book called, "The trouble we're in" (Johnson). Certain groups in society are given specific privileges because of the groups they belong to (qtd. in Johnson). Privilege exists at the expense of those who do not benefit from it.

From what I have learned, I believe that differences are beautiful. They are a necessary part of life. Without them, we would all be the same. How boring would that be? Ahmed, I admire your courage to not fight against your neighbors who oppress you. I hold to the belief that they will soon realize your great talents and appreciate you for who you are. I do not understand exactly who you are or what you are like, but I am grateful to have come into

contact with you and to have had the opportunity to gain your perspective of life in the United States. I believe that privilege exists in the U.S. because it is allowed to. Because we, in the "Land of Opportunity," are not doing enough to promote equality of races, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, etc., we are robbing ourselves of a beautiful and diverse United States (Abelardo).

Thank you again for writing to me, Ahmed. You have inspired me with your perspective and blown me away by your perseverance and humility. Until next time, my friend, may you know of my respect for you. May the blessings of Allah be with you as well.

Sincerely,

-Nicholas

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