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GoodWeekend



# DANGEROUS LIAISONS

THE SECRET LIVES OF GAY ARABS IN AUSTRALIA  
BY DAVID MARR



# STONE

THEY FEAR EXCLUSION, PERSECUTION, EVEN VIOLENCE, BUT THERE ARE GAY AUSTRALIANS OF MIDDLE EASTERN BACKGROUND WILLING TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED. **DAVID MARR** MEETS SOME OF THEM.

# WALLED

“**M**Y BROTHER HAS A GAY SON. HE CAME TO ME BLACK AND blue. The father, the sister and the brother-in-law want to get it out of him. They want to set him straight. A young, beautiful boy: black and blue. What do you do?”

Salma is in hijab. She is Australian, the mother of many children, a Muslim and in despair. Everything about her suggests a woman of authority. She has never spoken to the press and knows the danger of doing so now, the danger of feeding into coarse stereotypes of violent Islam. But her nephew's ordeal, which began two months ago in Melbourne, has persuaded her to speak out – not, she says, because such violence is exceptional, but because it happens all the time.

“All these remedies. They took him to a witchcraft lady. Exorcism. They say the devil in him makes him this way. This poor guy is so desperate and wants his family's approval he will do anything to be normal, to make his parents happy. He is 18. My brother says, ‘If you dare to let anyone know you are gay, any of my family or friends, I will slaughter you.’”

Are such threats ever carried out, I ask. “No, but when you are 18 you are terrified by your dad. When Fadi was kicked out, they stripped him of his money, all his ID, his key card. He was left on the street with nothing, nothing at all. How bad was that? I haven't heard about any killings. Bashing, yes. But not killing.

“They don't care if their children are happy or not. They are worried about themselves. They are selfish. They don't worry about what their children are going through. They are worried what people will say, what the community will say.”

Many years ago Salma discovered her own son was gay. “I did my reading, I did my research. I understand that was normal.” The boy was not touched, not thrown out of home. He has found ways of being Australian, Arab, Muslim and gay. Salma hopes the same might still be true for her young nephew.

“My brother's wife came to me and I said, ‘Read.’ I want parents to read. When you study, when you research, you understand. You accept. God created man that way. I want to tell them their son is not going to hell. Black and white: there is nothing wrong with your son.”

While parliaments tinker with superannuation entitlements for gay couples and political parties debate the pros and cons of marriage equality, gay kids are still being beaten in school playgrounds and gay adults are being bashed in the streets. Homosexuality thrives and so does homophobia. Not being straight in Australia remains a risky business.

But gay men and women of Middle Eastern background face particular risks in Australia, not in the streets but behind closed doors. *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to Be Safe*, a report by the NSW Attorney-General's Department almost a decade ago, found the most severe harassment and violence for them “tended to come from within their own families or communities – with lesbians facing especially difficult situations”. On the list of what they suffered were: “Exclusion, verbal abuse, assault, stalking, threats of violence and even death threats.”

This is happening in families of both Muslims and Christians from the Arab world. Imams and priests speak with one voice here, for Sodom and Gomorrah are on the map of both faiths. Across a great religious divide, Christians and Muslims agree that homosexuality is a source of profound shame; it is chosen, contagious and can be cured; it is against God's purpose for the bodies of both men and women; and unrepentant homosexuals end their days in hell.

Those lessons are so deep that not much is taught about them in mosques and Middle Eastern churches in this country. Keysar Trad, a prominent

Islamic spokesman who believes absolutely in the sinfulness of homosexuality, says the subject is “touched on from time to time in mosques, maybe once or twice a year”. He doubts it's taught at all in Islamic schools. “It is taught at home.”

Muslim leaders have taken no part in political controversies over gay law reform and gay marriage. Nor did they join the push led by Cardinal George Pell to prevent homosexuals having the protection of a bill of rights. They did not engage. Indeed, they refused to engage. They stayed silent. “But there is so much spoken in that silence,” says psychologist Sekneh Beckett. “It deafens you.”

Beckett is matter-of-fact, passionate and Muslim. She writes, teaches and counsels in English and Arabic. The gay community regard her with great respect, not least for her bravery. We meet at Twenty10, a drop-in and counselling service in Sydney's inner west for kids who are – or are exploring the possibilities of being – anything but straight.

“Most of the young people I meet here are presenting from extreme violence experienced at the hands of their families in response to knowing their sexuality,” Beckett says. “Violence expresses itself in a myriad of ways whether it's physical, emotional, financial, social – a whole gamut of violence that's perpetrated on these young people.

“Some young people come to me and say death is a better option because they are living in hell,” she says. Many have endured exorcism or one of the “reparative” therapies Islam and Christianity



continue to offer to turn gays straight. A few have attempted suicide: “I don’t think these kids want to die. They want to kill the pain.” Some of the kids are homeless, others are drifting in an unfamiliar world having been thrown out of home and cut off entirely from their communities.

She absolves the families of deliberate malice. “I don’t think they are intentionally trying to be mean or bad. They believe they are trying to save their child from the wrath of hell. But they create hell for their child. They make their child live a hell.”

Silence, she argues, is one of the most effective tools of violence. Nothing can be done unless there is a discussion of some sort about what is going on here. “Even if they are yelling and screaming I can enter some sort of conversation. At least I can say to them, ‘I honour your grief, I hear what you are dealing with. All the dreams you have had for your child have changed now. I can honour that.’

“But I can also say, ‘When you gave birth to your child and looked into their eyes, did you hope that the world would treat them with love, dignity and respect? How do we not lose sight of that? And afford your child such love when they have invited you to understand their sexuality?’”

Beckett is far from seeing the situation as hopeless. Across Australia, gay men and women are still Muslim and Christian, still loved by their families, still part of their communities. What’s happening in the outside world is reaching into the Arab and Muslim suburbs of Australia. Time is doing its work here. Silence is breaking down. The resilience and ingenuity of her clients delights her: “Every day I walk out of the office inspired by their skills of survival.”

**A** MONTH AGO, BAN KI-MOON DELIVERED a heartfelt message to the Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva to discuss violence and discrimination against gays and lesbians around the globe. Third World intransigence had kept the subject off the council’s agenda for a very long time. South Africa and the US had forced it on. The delegates were restive.

Once the diminutive Secretary-General had finished his rousing endorsement of the “universal values the United Nations has sworn to defend and uphold”, delegates representing Arab, African and Islamic countries staged a mass walkout.

On the way to the door, Pakistan condemned homosexuality as “licentious behaviour” and Mauritania, on behalf of the Arab bloc, warned that the introduction of this “controversial topic” put at risk all future discussion of human rights by the council. In Mauritania, Saudi Arabia and Iran, homosexuals still face execution.

But this wall of disapproval has been fracturing for a long time. The gay rights movement that flourished in the West from the 1960s reached the Middle East in the 1990s. The first gay and lesbian rights organisation appeared in Turkey and Istanbul soon had gay rights marches. Helem (“dream” in Arabic) was founded in Lebanon in 2004 and Beirut became – if it had not always been – one of the gay capitals of the world.

“In Beirut it is beautiful,” Salma tells me. “You see them holding hands. It’s beautiful.”

Gay Australians visiting their parents’ homelands saw what was happening in Turkey and Lebanon and brought the news home. News also reached Australia of gay Muslims organising in Canada, America and England. The dance parties of Club Arak began in Sydney in 2002 and are still going strong.



“**THE FIRST MESSAGE ... IS THAT GAYS AND LESBIANS EXIST WITHIN OUR FAMILIES. WE KNOW IT BUT WE TURN OUR BACKS ON THAT TRUTH.**”

“It was the greatest, greatest, greatest!” reports a happy customer. “I didn’t think it existed. And when I arrived it was this bunch of lesbians and gay guys. They were Arab. They were sitting there having drinks. Just chatting. It wasn’t a rave. It wasn’t drugs or drunkards. It was just great. People just hanging out. Nice introductions, music, pool... It was fantastic.”

Documentaries on gay experience in the Muslim world and the Middle East began to appear. They were brave and cautious. Faces were often shown in silhouette. In Sydney, Muslim and Middle Eastern gays began marching rather tentatively in Mardi Gras.

By this time, gay life in Australia was being transformed by the internet. Gays and lesbians from Arab and Muslim families were able to meet online for sex and to talk about the difficulties of

their lives in almost total secrecy. In Melbourne in 2004, Alyena Mohummadally, a Pakistani-Australian lawyer, set up the pioneering online forum Queer Muslims in Australia.

“I was terrified I would be killed or my mother would be killed or my sister would be killed or someone in the community would kill themselves,” Mohummadally told a gathering at this year’s Mardi Gras. “I was terrified. I was thinking worst-case scenario. So for years I went under a pseudonym. I was ‘Ally M’. I refused to use my name.” Then she came out. “But thankfully we live in a reasonably laid-back nation and nothing happened. That’s given me the courage to be more visible.

“That’s important for people in the Muslim community but it is also important for people in the non-Muslim community not to make the assumption that you live in that religion with crazy Taliban people going around chopping each other’s heads off. People ask, ‘Why would you want to identify as a Muslim?’ I say I don’t identify with their version of Islam and most people I know don’t. I identify as Muslim, but I am very much queer as well. They are two halves to the whole.”

AFTER YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE TO HIDE TO BE SAFE revealed those disturbing patterns of violence within families, ACON, the peak gay and lesbian health body in NSW, decided to take a closer, deeper look. The idea was to work with organisations and individuals – both Muslim and Christian – in the Arab community to examine the impact of homophobia in their families. Nothing like it had been attempted in Australia before. It was new and hard.

Only now, after seven years and endless diplomacy, is that report being released. Everything about *We’re Family Too* signals how sensitive the project was. No one who took part is named: not the priests and imams consulted by the steering committee nor the gay men and women – many recruited through Club Arak – who spoke of the violence and threats of violence they had experienced within their families and Arab communities.

Ghassan Kassisieh, a young lawyer brought in to write the final report nearly five years ago, is the only person whose name is attached to the document. He says: “The first message of the report is that gays and lesbians exist within our families. We know it but we turn our backs on that truth. It is hypocritical to have attitudes about gay people as if they were outside of who we are as Arabs.”

Kassisieh knows this firsthand. He is 27 and gay, from a family of Christian and Palestinian heritage. These days he works for one of the big Sydney law firms, but he was recruited to pull the ACON report into shape soon after finishing a pioneering thesis at Sydney University that explored the same theme: how gays and lesbians negotiate – or fall foul – of the demands of their Arab families.

“In Arab cultural understandings, it is selfish, it is turning your back on your family to come out and move out,” he says over a sandwich in a cafe in Sydney’s legal quarter. “It is risking the family’s happiness and the family’s honour and the family’s reputation in the community for the sake of your own desires. So that’s a tension there: as Australians we value autonomy, but the Arab family values collectiveness.”

Banishment comes at a high price. “Your cultural bearings can be completely ripped away if you come out and move out because you’ll move

to a predominantly white suburb, you’ll eat predominantly white food, you’ll associate with predominantly white people, and on the off chance that you discover another gay or lesbian person from an Arabic background and you have, you know, the epiphany of belonging – that’s maybe one night a fortnight or one night a year even. So it’s a big ask to be asked to leave everything for the sake of living openly.”

But staying may mean violence, physical or emotional. “It is very hidden, it’s very quietly done, it’s a diplomatic violence. The participants in the ACON report talk a lot about negotiating places in their lives where it is safe and not safe to disclose their sexuality. The immediate family may not be the main instigators of the violence. Often it is the next step out from the immediate family: uncles, a cousin, some member of the family powerful in the community who is charged with the responsibility of making sure everyone is on the straight and narrow.”

When Kassisieh talks of “bigotry peppered with love”, he is not offering excuses but tracking the trouble to its source. “The homophobia is from absolute, blatant ignorance. Love gets directed in a homophobic way because that is the only way families know how to protect their children.” Nothing in the work he has done over the years suggests any difference here between Christian and Muslim families.



“What you need is a patriarch or matriarch to stand up and for the first time say, ‘There is someone in my family who is gay or lesbian and I will not have you say a bad word about them here or in church or at the local restaurant or at the mosque.’ To say, ‘It is dishonourable to dishonour an individual on the basis of their sexuality. It is actually contrary to our culture to turn our backs in this way.’”

**R**ANDA KATTAN IS DRUMMING HER watermelon-pink fingernails on the cover of *We’re Family Too*. Her office looks across a six-lane highway that cuts a swath through this corner of western Sydney. Every shelf and window sill holds awards, certificates, official gifts and pots of cactus. The executive director of Arab Council Australia has just come back from a couple of



weeks in Lebanon to face the launch of a report she and her council have backed from the beginning. “We are saying there is homophobia and there is violence in the homes. These are the things we want to address.”

She knows it’s going to be hard. “It’s going to be painful. It’s going to be extremely uncomfortable for many and it’s going to get a lot of those things out in the open. But those discussions need to be had,” says this formidable community organiser.

Kattan sees the process as evidence of the Arab community operating from a position of strength. “We, as an organisation, as a community, are willing to look at ourselves and actually look at how we are going to progress beyond those fears.

“My concern is the community being seen to be violent when it’s not the case. There are pockets. There are different people who express these kinds of phobias aggressively. But it happens in other places as well.”

Though shocked by some of the detail in the report, the general picture that emerged was familiar to Kattan. “It’s about the family looking after its own. That’s what it’s about. It’s about the family enforcing social norms. This is where people are taught culture, I guess, reinforcing everything. It’s to do with shame. It’s to do with how people see us. We do a great deal of stuff so long as it doesn’t shame the family. This is still seen as very shameful for the entire family.”

She knows she faces opposition – she knows a number of religious leaders are hostile to this enterprise – but now is not the time to contest their view of homosexuality. That’s not the focus. She hopes imams and bishops will join in condemning violence: “We need to get them to the point of saying, ‘You’re damned to hell but it’s not on to have violence.’”

Keysar Trad takes not a step backwards in his condemnation of homosexuality as sinful, evil, against nature, damaging to society and “the ugliest form of perversion”. He acknowledges gay children face violence in Muslim families in Australia: “I’m sure it does happen.” He believes it’s neither effective nor justified.

“I have publicly stated on occasions that no person has any right to harm someone who lives a gay lifestyle, that Islam requires us to give private counsel motivated out of love and a will to save the person from what we believe to be self-harm. I have also done this on some occasions where I was delivering a sermon in a mosque.”

THIS IS A STUDENT CALLED MEDI: “WHEN I WAS really young, I thought everyone was like this but kept it a secret. As I grew up I just realised: those gay people, I think I’m one of them.” After confiding in a relative one day, he found himself betrayed to his father. “It was almost as if I had purposely done something against my family, as if I had murdered his daughter. That’s how it was taken. Tears were pouring down my dad’s face.

“And this is coming from parents who are not religious, who do enjoy a glass of wine at dinner, who do view the headscarf with suspicion. But when it comes to questions of sex, Islam comes first. He never said, ‘How could you be this way?’ He said, ‘How could you lie to me?’

“I was kept under lock and key. I was brutalised. I wasn’t allowed to go out unless my brother was with me. I couldn’t have male friends. I was just 18. And this is after I convinced my dad it was a phase, I was just experimenting. I went with that because I was scared as hell, I was still a young kid, and I said, ‘Yep, that’s good enough, if this is the answer you are looking for.’

“From 18 to 22 I really tried to reinforce the fact that I was straight, that I loved girls. I had some real girlfriends, had some fake ones, I was betrothed at one stage. When I was 20 I found a girl at uni and I thought maybe this would work. I saw her for a year. Our parents met and not long after that I broke it off. I saved this poor girl. These are the cards that I’ve been dealt and it’s not fair for me to hurt innocent people.”

Medi nearly left home last October when his parents were away on holiday but at the last minute he baulked. “The situation just wasn’t right because there is so much I needed to take into consideration. I have to run away without them knowing and make sure they can’t find me.” Once again he is preparing to make the break. He will leave behind a letter for his parents, a letter he has put his heart and soul into. In time he will make contact with them again through cousins.

“I won’t just be leaving my family. I will be leaving the community. It’s harder for me because I do have standing in the community. I am one of the leaders. So I have to give that up in order to lead a small part of my life.” Small, I ask?

“**THOUGH MY BELIEF IS AGNOSTIC, I STILL WON’T GO AND HAVE A BACON AND EGG ROLL. BUT I WILL HAVE SEX WITH MEN.**”

“In the context of who I am, it’s not huge. It doesn’t define me.”

In his mid-20s he has reached a troubled impasse with his faith. “My belief is agnostic but my identity is Muslim. Islam is a way of life. It is the truth. Islam teaches us how to wash ourselves. How to eat, what to eat, what not to eat. Even how to have sex on our first night of marriage. Though my belief is agnostic, I still won’t go and have a bacon and egg roll. But I will have sex with men.” **GW**

**Agents of change:** (top) lawyer Ghassan Kassisieh, author of the ACON report *We’re Family Too*; (above left) Alyena Mohummadally, who set up the online forum Queer Muslims in Australia.