



Source: Stephen Erlanger, 'Letter from the Middle East: Gaza's story depends on who spins the tale', *International Herald Tribune online*, 21/07/05
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Derek had seen the videotape fragment three times now, first on the Tuesday evening news. Police had released it in hope of identifying suspects connected to eight recent suicide bombings that had left the regional transit system in ruins. Several people from his village had died in one of the blasts.

'The terrorist movement claiming responsibility is believed to have operational cells located in the Village or nearby Wemberley, where one of the ill-fated commuter trains originated,' said the city police chief. 'The group is believed affiliated with the Zander Code.'

This bizarre offshoot of the state religion scrutinised every aspect of society and claimed violence was the only answer to flagrant immorality. Although execution without trial was strictly illegal, nobody seemed to mind when a few moral degenerates were lynched on the Village green at night. Derek knew older boys who might have been responsible, but no one ever asked.

Now that bombs had indiscriminately claimed lives of upstanding citizens, the police were looking more closely.

He happened to have recorded the news in anticipation of a feature he wanted to use for a school project, but that was forgotten after the videotape. He stopped the newscast and replayed it once before deleting it.

Three men were seen standing in a room lit by a single overhead bulb. Two faced the camera, but the tape was so grainy their faces would be difficult to identify. One was bare-chested. A third man stood facing them, his body no more than a dark shadow with an outstretched hand. It grazed past the navel of the bare-chested man, who raised his left hand, touching in response. The light glinted momentarily on his gold wedding ring.

That was all. Derek should have felt appalled. It was not illegal to touch another man, at least to the extent these images revealed. But homosexual acts were forbidden by law, considered abominable by the state religion, and punishable by death. No one paid attention when two or three effeminate, unmarried men got hanged in the night.

The words in his ears said police believed the terrorists had used sexual coercion and blackmail to recruit devout believers to their cause. Police could not explain why religious extremists, who normally punished degenerates like these, had resorted to such a scheme, but they requested help in identifying the individuals portrayed in the video.

Instead of feeling outraged, he sensed unspeakable tenderness in the men's caresses. Such an image had never appeared before on public television. Derek felt sorry for the men betrayed that way. His sentiment was a perilous one, which he dared express to no one. A tingling shame poured over his skin. He had already had a couple of girlfriends, but their touch had not excited him the same as this ambiguous, anonymous interchange.

Walking to school Wednesday morning, he saw an unusual sight: two police cruisers parked near the Village green, by the verge in front of the new people's house.

He supposed everyone would be distraught over the news, but no one mentioned it all day, even the social science teacher. Several times he had the feeling of being watched. Once he glanced up from reading to discover Mr. Grey's spectacled gaze fixed on him steadily.

The only other unusual thing that day was a visit from Dorian before French class. Derek was exchanging books at his locker when his classmate came by. This usually heralded trouble. Dorian was one of the bigger, stronger, stupider kids who used to pick on Derek. That had changed six months ago after Derek's father disappeared from the Village. Everyone had teased Derek and his sister until Dorian offered an uncertain alliance. It was simple: he would protect Derek to the extent of beating up kids who made his life miserable. Derek only had to do whatever his defender asked.

Dorian pressed a note into his hand.

'Give this to Kylie in French class,' he ordered, nothing more.

Derek hated facilitating this childish schoolroom romance. Kylie and her friends always giggled behind his back. But the consequences of non-compliance were unthinkable.

Oddly, these illicit errands excited him. The teacher never caught him; Derek felt proud about doing something that scared Dorian. Derek also felt pleased about being useful to someone bigger and stronger. Finally, there was the rush he felt when Dorian pressed the paper into his palm.

Derek walked into French class at the last moment. Kylie was already seated. Passing her desk, he tucked the note under her open notebook. This time she said nothing, and none of her friends laughed. He had to walk up the endless row of desks with his back to them. Turning at his seat, he saw the girls watching him silently. Olivia Madison has thick lenses that made her eyes look funny. He sat down and faced the front.

That night he web-searched for news items about the videotape, hoping it had never happened, but there it was. He didn't intend to view the video again, but it popped up when he surfed to the site. The third time affected him more intensely because he knew what would happen, and imagined being the recipient of that touch. The bare chest was covered with coarse, dark hair.

His father used to touch and kiss Derek and his sister on the forehead every evening: a mark of protection, he told them. Derek longed to feel it again. The last time had been the moment before his father vanished six months ago. Tonight it felt more like forever. The apologetic letters had proven it was abandonment, and yet a new, strange question came to Derek's mind. What had drawn their father away from them? Derek had never doubted for a moment that his father had loved them. Could anything less than death end that love? The memory kept replaying itself: his father's gold ring glinting under the dull living room light as he reached to pat Derek on the shoulder.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Van Waffle.