



THE BLOG 12/07/2015 01:22 pm ET | Updated Dec 07, 2016

The Terrorists' 6-Month-Old



By Marty Kaplan



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Think about the day she finds out who her parents were.

For a while, all she'll know is that yes, she did have a mommy and daddy, but they died. But one day, whoever is then caring for her may be unable to avoid telling her the rest of the story — how they abandoned her to do a terrible thing, and how they died.

My heart goes out to her. Her parents' hearts, though, did not go out to the 14 people they killed and the 21 they wounded. They gave their victims as much power to control the story of how their lives ended as they gave their daughter to control the story of how her life began.

She will not be safe. There will be people who wish her harm. If she knows it, and she likely will, she is doomed to live out her days in the shadow of perpetual dread, the same sentence her mother and father intended their act to mete out to you and me, the same fear of some next hell that can befall anyone, anywhere, without warning. Except that, thanks to her parents, now we all have been warned.

To protect her, I can imagine that her identity will be changed. The surrogate family that envelops her will serve as a kind of witness protection program. They may even choose not to tell her who she really is. Why not spare her that unbearable burden? If they keep it from her, as a mercy, surely she will never need learn the truth.

But we know in our bones that that is not how stories like this ever go. Some day, without meaning to, someone who does know the truth will let something slip. Or she will stumble across an inexplicably troubling photo or letter, and with the relentlessness of an Oedipus, she will dig and dig until she eventually discovers that what she thought was her life story is actually a cover story, until she finds out that who she really is is a horror beyond belief.

I wonder where she will fit into the master narrative of terrorism we have been telling ourselves since we began living it on 9/11. For us in the West, it is a story that includes London, Madrid, Paris and the criminally catastrophic war of choice in Iraq. For many in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, daily life under the perpetual threat of terrorism is a story with older and deeper roots. For Americans, what may make San Bernardino an inflection point in this narrative is our nauseating awareness of how easy it is for evil to conceal itself from our vigilance.

After San Bernardino, sleeper cells are not pulp fiction. Their members may give off no whiff of loner or zealot. They may bring casseroles to our holiday potlucks. They may have cribs in their bedrooms and bombs in their garages. Say what we want about the manifest injustice of racial profiling, but in the wake of San Bernardino, when our love of liberty meets our moral panic in the back alley of our soul, we know which part of human nature packs more heat. In the privacy of our fears, beyond the grasp of our better angels, in the anxious age we inhabit, how many faces will we soon be scanning for murderous intent simply because they are brown?

That defines a danger that leaders of a democracy are obliged to confront. In such a climate, it is hard enough to say, as did George W. Bush and Barack Obama, that our war is not with Islam. Harder still, for a politician, is resisting the temptation to fan paranoia, because as we know now, even paranoids can have monsters for neighbors. But in the hothouse of this perverse campaign, there is no apparent downside to being as demagogic or extremist as Donald Trump or Ted Cruz.

When Trump proposes that all Muslims should register in a data bank, when he says that bombing the crap out of ISIS should include bombing their families, when he warns that “there is something going on with [Obama] that we don’t know about” — which is code for: Obama is a foreign-born Muslim — I wonder whether the fascism in those sulfurous words is the stink of the quadrennium to come. I fear that Trump and his rivals on the right have lit an uncivil wildfire, have unleashed a zombie ferocity that will continue to terrorize us even after, God willing, their own presidential campaigns are dead.

Which will mean that the terrorists will have won. They may never stop us from shopping, but already they are stopping us from being as proud as we once were of our diversity, as confident as we once felt about our generosity, as limitless as we once believed was our capacity for democratic freedom.

San Bernardino County will soon hold a dependency hearing to determine where the 6-month-old will live, at least in the short term. Her father’s sister told ABC News that she and her husband would like to adopt her. “For the time being, we want her to enjoy her innocence,” she said. “We don’t want her to know everything, but I think eventually she will find out, probably on her own.” Enjoying innocence, even if only for the time being: for the terrorists’ baby, it’s a sweet wish. Too bad the rest of us can’t get in on it.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, where you can reach me if you’d like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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