

# TOOLS OF THE TRADE

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## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Martin first knew there was going to be trouble when his adopted son Lionel refused to eat pork.

"It's not halal," he said.

"Yes, I know," Martin said with a quick look at his wife Deborah. "It's not kosher, either."

"Then why do we eat it?"

"We don't keep kosher."

"Well, I keep halal."

"Now we know," Martin said softly.

For a moment there was an embarrassed silence.

Lionel was fifteen, just beginning to kick hard against the door of his stall. Martin and Deborah had adopted him in their late forties, and now, in their early sixties, were finding him a little hard to handle.

He was black, already a hefty six-footer, with big feet still to grow into.

"If you don't mind," he finally said.

"Not at all," Martin said. "If that's what you want."

He and Deborah exchanged a smile.

"Can I buy kosher meat for you?" Deborah asked. "It's halal, too."

"It is?" Lionel said.

"Yes," Martin said. "It's killed the same way. The only difference is the rabbi says 'Adonoi' over it instead of 'Allah.'"

"I'll have to ask," Lionel said.

"Ask who?"

"Kabili."

"Who's Kabili?" Deborah asked.

"A friend."

"From school?"

"From around school."

"You'll have to introduce him to us," Martin said.

"I don't think he'll want to meet you."

"Why not?"

"Well, first you're white and then you're Jewish."

It was as though a 14-foot snake had just slithered into the room. Martin and Deborah again exchanged a glance, and this time neither of them was smiling.

"We're your parents," Martin pointed out.

"I can't help that," Lionel shot back, his voice high, like fists held up to protect his face.

"We love you," Deborah pointed out.

Lionel had no answer to that.

Later that night, Martin and Deborah discussed what to do.

"It's a phase," Martin said. "The main thing is patience."

"Patience!" Deborah said. "Give him another two weeks and he'll hate us as much as Kabili does."

"And another year or two and he'll be a Buddhist and love everybody. He's just starting his spiritual journey."

"I don't like the first stop," Deborah said.

"I don't like it either. But we're not driving the train. Believe me, he's still just a kid. All we've got to do is hang in and love him."

"That's all?" Deborah said. And began to cry.

So Martin and Deborah found a halal butcher shop and began to read the Koran.

"I like what it says about food," Martin said. "It wants people not to eat too much."

"Don't you go Muslim on me," Deborah said.

"Who knows?" Martin laughed. "He's already got me reading the Koran."

The next step for Lionel was changing his name. He wanted to be called Kobe.

"A person should be called whatever he wants to be called," Martin said. "But you know we didn't name you Lionel."

"No?" Lionel said.

"It was the name you had been given before we adopted you. We wanted to retain that tie to your past. Are you sure you want to sever it?"

"Who gave me that name?"

Martin shrugged. "I don't know. Your mother. Your father. It's what they called you in foster care."

Silence.

"You're sure you want to give it up?"

Martin saw tears welling up in Lionel's eyes. A sign of hope.

"Well, think about it," Martin said. "It's a big decision."

Soon a prayer rug appeared, and Lionel began to attend Friday services at the local Nation of Islam mosque. The good effect of all this was that he became much more intent on his schoolwork and began to volunteer on Sundays to tutor younger children in math. His room became military clean, and he took care of his personal hygiene with almost fanatical discipline.

The bad effects were more serious.

Except for an opening prayer thanking Allah for the meal, supper became silent, and in between meals there was nothing left of what had been a joking and gentle interplay between parents and child. It was as though they had rented a room to a Muslim boarder who considered them unclean and stayed away from them as much as possible.

And then there were the pamphlets Lionel started leaving around the house – not carelessly, since he was anything but careless these days, and not to proselytize, since they were white and therefore beyond redemption.

Some were the most simplistic of religious instruction, often in comic-book form: when, where, and how to pray, what to eat, what to wear, and so on. But some were the most crude, racist, anti-white and anti-Jewish propaganda Martin and Deborah had ever seen.

Whites were born devils who had dragged an almost saintly black population out of an Africa that sounded like Eden. Jews were parasites who ruled the world behind the scenes through their control of

finance and the media. Israel was an outpost in a Judeo-Christian plot to take over the Muslim world.

"At least he's reading," Martin joked.

Deborah wasn't laughing.

"Come on," Martin said. "It's a good sign he's leaving this stuff around. It shows he wants us to know what he's going through."

"He's shoving it in our faces!" Deborah said.

"He hates us! When we adopted a black child, we always knew this was a possibility. But I never believed it would happen."

"Don't believe it now," Martin said.

One night, when Lionel wanted to go out without telling them where he was going, Martin sat him down in his room.

"We're still your parents," he said.

"I don't recognize you as such," Lionel answered.

Martin heard the bravado beneath the antagonism, something natural, something to be expected in a 15-year-old looking for excuses not to do what he is told, and breathed a long inner sigh.

"We're responsible for you," he insisted. "We have to know where you're going."

"To a session."

"Where's the session?"

"At the mosque."

"Lionel, you can always go to the mosque. Whenever you like. You just have to tell us truthfully where you're going and when you expect to be back."

"It's more like a class."

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

"Don't be afraid to tell me things," Martin said. "I'm a big boy. I can take it."

"We learn about what white people do to black people. What Jews do to Muslims."

There was a punch in the old abs! Martin thought. Good, good! Now there was an opening for a return.

"Lionel," he said. "I want you to know that we love you, no matter what you think or who you become. You go where you want to go and think what you want to think. We want you to become your own person."

"Then why did you adopt me?" Lionel asked angrily, fighting tears. "Didn't you know you were robbing me of who I was?"

"When we saw you come back from foster care for the third time, it broke our hearts," Martin said. "You were already over two years old. You had been addicted to cocaine in the womb. No one wanted you but us."

"Why did you want me? I was black. You were white. What sense does that make?"

"A white child would have had no problem finding a home. We wanted to give a home to someone who needed it."

"Needed it?" Lionel cried out. "Needed it? Didn't you know you would mess me all up? I didn't know who I was. I didn't know where I belonged. Thanks be to Allah, now I know. I don't want you! I

don't want you anywhere near me! A white man! A Jew! What do you have to do with me?"

"I'm your father," Martin said. "And I love you."

He kissed his sobbing son on the forehead.

"I know you've got a lot to deal with. We've given you a lot to deal with. Life has given you a lot to deal with. We want you to know that we love you and we want you to be happy. Whoever you turn out to be. Whatever you think of us. That's it. That's the whole thing."

He kissed him again.

"Just let us know where you're going and when you're coming back," he said, straightening up to leave. "Until you're older, we're still responsible for you."

He waited for a nod that didn't come.

Only so much at one time, he thought as he left the room. He was grateful that Lionel had gotten to say what he had wanted to say, which had given him in turn an opportunity to open up his heart. Now he would just have to trust Lionel and the years of love he and Deborah had put into him.

After all, what else had he to work with but patience, trust, and love?