

Bless This Christmess

Featuring faith, feasts and folk devils, Daniel Nour presents his Christmas survival guide.

It's 24 December. The bells are ringing, the lights are twinkling, and Mum's macarona bechamel is sizzling in the oven. For Egyptians like me, macarona bechamel is the ultimate celebratory meal: a vast, steaming tray bake of penne bathed in a cream sauce, layered in a pan with mince beef stewed in tomato, then topped with a sharp cheese. Glorious, abundant and satisfying – I can almost hear angel song now, over the sound of my grumbling tummy.

But Christmas is not a bed of roses – or Nile lotuses, to be more ethnoculturally accurate. It's a challenging time, forcing queer Arabs like me to confront the ignorant assumptions, or outright prejudice, of homophobia. Over a table richly laden with good things, Middle Eastern singles across the nation sit down to delicious meals served with a side of piping-hot guilt. *When will you get married? When will you give us grandchildren? Don't you want a household and a family of your own?*

The tricky paradox here is that these oppressive expectations come from those who claim to love us most: parents, grandparents, well-meaning aunts and uncles. The same mouths that bless, curse, as the biblical adage goes.

Religion is another tricky arena. At masses and church services across the country, be they Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, invocations against "moral evils" – like homosexuality and sex outside of marriage – are trumped up into moral panics. At Christmas mass last year, the church was decorated with tinsel and holly, sparkling and bright. The hymns were rousing, with uplifting Arabic tunes such as 'Leilat Eid' and 'Ahla bi Yassou', and a moving doxology. I felt the tingly anticipation I get in my arms and legs just before a moment of transcendence. Then the priest rose to warn us that "we cannot welcome Jesus into our homes if they are haunted with vice and lust". Way to put a damper on the mood, Father.

After mass, many of us go home to open presents and, with these, share the much-anticipated and resented saying of *aabelik*, which roughly translates to, "May you marry next". The exchange of gifts is followed by a large meal. Middle Eastern Christians,

especially Orthodox and Catholics, are vegetarian for Advent, the three to four weeks that precede Christmas. So, along with vine leaves stuffed with rice, and a decorative salad or two, we eat whole chickens or turkeys fragrant with spice. There's also mansaf or maqloubeh – rice dishes studded with nuts and dried fruit, turned upside down on the plate to give a domed effect, and then topped with cuts of lamb, chicken or beef. Skewers of lamb, braised livers, kebbe (the beloved minced raw lamb with bulghur) and kobeba (those little fried zeppelins of minced lamb and bulghur) grace our tables, too.

To ensure everyone enjoys Christmas this year, I propose a three-pronged approach – a holy trinity of anxiety-preventing tactics. Firstly, I will pick my battles. Not every aunt or grandparent needs to know my personal business. Though they may ask, "Are you seeing anyone?" the harsh truth is, if they're unwilling to meet my partner, they are unworthy of a response more detailed than, "I've been so busy with work!" For those allies in the family who are more genuinely open to the details of my life, my second tactic will be deliberate and honest conversation. Hip cousins, cool uncles and those generally "in the know" are the ones I want to spend more of my time with on Christmas Day. We might go for a walk, or sip coffee on the verandah, as I open up about my (love) life.

Finally, and most importantly, Christmas is about making memories. To this end, I spend most of the day playing with my nieces and nephews, running around the park or pushing them on swings. I know their generation will be more relaxed, forthright and courageous about matters of the heart, so I relish the chance to see them laugh and grow.

And, when all else fails – when conversation falls short and I feel frustrated, worn out or just plain hungry – I can always go back for another serving of macarona bechamel. ■

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