

## Tunisian Taxi Driver

by Leah Stenson

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As my daughter walked towards me that June evening in midtown Manhattan, the first thing I noticed was a red and white cotton scarf—a *keffiyeh*—wrapped around her shoulders. *Keffiyeh* have been worn by Arab men for centuries. Since 9-11, Westerners have associated these traditional headdresses with Arab solidarity, and the red and white *keffiyeh*, in particular, with radical Palestinian factions. In the West, Bohemians and hipsters have taken to wearing *keffiyeh* as a fashion statement. Marisa explained that this particular *keffiyeh* was a present to me from a Tunisian taxi driver.

Back in December, Marisa and I had hopped a cab. The driver was in a bad mood. Marisa tried to make conversation. When she discovered that the driver was Tunisian, Marisa excitedly told him she had visited his country and wondered if he knew any of her friends. “Not possible,” he retorted. When he dropped us off, Marisa gave him a generous tip despite his frosty attitude. We were barely out of the cab before he sped away.

Now, six months later, the evening before I was meeting her in New York, Marisa had attended an art opening where she was introduced by a friend to a Tunisian named Becem. At first, Marisa couldn't place him, but he insisted that he knew her. It turned out that Becem was the taxi driver who had given us a ride months earlier.

He confessed he had felt hopeless that December night—ready to give up on life. Marisa's kindness had touched him, and he remembered she had a “hip mother who radiated life.” From the moment he sped away from the curb, he said, he regretted not returning Marisa's kindness. For days afterwards, he hoped and prayed he could somehow run into her again so he would have a chance to make amends. Although he professed not to believe in God, Becem now felt that being able to meet Marisa again was proof that his prayers had been answered. He took off his *keffiyeh* and placed it on Marisa's shoulders, asking her to give it to her mother as a token of his appreciation.

Standing on that mid-town Manhattan street corner as she related the tale of her encounter with Becem, Marisa removed the *keffiyeh* from her shoulders and wrapped it around me. With that gesture, Marisa, Becem and I were collectively cloaked in solidarity, healing, and compassion.