

# The Man in the Mosque

Mrs. Kathleen Mckim (Entry 30-05)

## Third Place Winner

I live next to a mosque. Is there really anyone in Kuwait who doesn't? "My mosque," as I like to call it, is fairly new. It was just being built when I arrived three years ago, so the mullah who woke me at night was actually 3 or 4 blocks away at the time. I didn't know that, however, and with every call to prayer those first few days after I had settled into my new apartment, I would run to the window and peer at the minaret directly across from me to catch a glimpse of the tiny man who climbed up to the top of the tower five times a day to shout "Allahu akbar!" I was amazed at his speed and agility. Why could I never see this man who woke me up every morning at 4:30, who sounded as if he were in my room, standing above me, giving praise to God through a bullhorn directly over my head?

A kind friend took pity upon me in my naïveté, cluing me into the fact that the calls to prayer these days were recorded. To be honest, I was a little bit disappointed. This modern "recorded" method was incongruous with my vision of Islamic worship, which had been aided in no small part by watching *The Message*. Where were the suffering Muslims, persecuted for their faith? Where were the maligned, misunderstood followers of Allah, who had been branded terrorist extremists by the Western media? I saw none of that in Kuwait. My experience the first week left me with the impression that Kuwait was full of smiling Pilipino waiters, malls with expensive shops which far outclassed the Wal-Mart in my rural Kentucky town, and plastic bags floating aloft on the breeze.

Nevertheless, there were still the calls to prayer five times a day. And they were, admittedly, loud. Even though the means of calling worshipers had lost its mystique, I was still fascinated by my closeness to this new religion. My father, a conservative Baptist minister, thought I had come to Kuwait to "save" a few Muslims—lead them to the Lord and convert them to Christianity. I wasn't exactly sure that was my calling. I was pretty sure I'd come here to teach English. Once school started, I fell into a routine, sometimes not even hearing the mosques as I extolled the virtues of various poets and novelists.

Fridays, however, were different. Fridays were my days to sleep in until noon. Not anymore. A low, resonating voice would begin around 11:30 with what sounded like a greeting and a prayer. Men would fill the streets, making their way to every possible entrance to the mosque, kicking their shoes off at the door. I've seen (and heard) it up close now since the mosque beside my house is open for business. Cars are double-, and even triple-parked on the street. Fathers run hand-in-hand with their sons across the courtyard to join other fathers and sons in prayer. An old man with a cane finds support between two younger, stronger men who have slowed to help him. I have never been inside a mosque, and I don't know what goes on once a person goes inside. But I do know that for one hour on Friday, it seems the whole neighborhood pauses to reflect, and it is peace. One man speaks and people listen. And this is happening simultaneously, all over Kuwait. It is lovely.

I've had friends who have moved from my building claiming they couldn't get any rest from the noise of the mosque. Good for them, since their constant complaints were more tiring to me than the noise from the mosque. One person actually said that she didn't understand what was

being said in the mosques on Fridays, but she was sure from the tone of voice, that it was a message full of hate. I wondered how she could say that when she had no idea of the words that were spoken.

I love Friday mornings. I love the beginning of the message, the welcome, the prayer. I listen for the enthusiasm and excitement to build, to become faster and faster as the speaker loses himself in a larger communion with God. The crescendo is followed by a *salaam*, a prayer for peace, and men depart as they came--father with son, old and young. Cars untangle. Newness settles. Spirits are renewed. As I look and listen at my window, all suddenly seems right with the world. Sometimes, I think I see, out of the corner of my eye, the little man who climbs the tower. He is smiling as he descends.