Choice

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The drive from the airport had her pretty worked up. I wasn’t surprised. She probably hadn’t liked the guards’ manners, either—or the fact that she received an escort in the first place.

One guard in particular was eyeing her with unhealthy interest—or at least, a more intense interest than she or I was happy with.

“Ms. Pellegrini,” I said, opening the door wider with a bit of an Old World bow—it’s a habit, and I should know better with American feminists, but I forget. “I’m Mohammed Raheem; welcome to our city.”

The guards stepped back a bit. Two of them kept a wary eye down the hallway, just in case; that other was still watching his charge.

“Mr. Raheem,” she said, staring at me, clearly trying to decide whether to blame me for her treatment, and for what she had seen—and not seen, with her particular interests she would undoubtedly have noticed what she did not see—on her ride.

“Won’t you have a seat?” I asked.

“You’re...it says on the door you represent the World Health Organization.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Please sit down.”

She made no move toward the chair I indicated; she didn’t even let go her hold on the open door.

“I don’t know why they sent me here,” she said. “I expected to speak to the Minister of Education, or to a human rights commissioner of some sort, or perhaps some propaganda agency.”

“Well, if you’ll come in and sit down, perhaps we can straighten that out.” I gestured at the chair again.

She gave it another second or two of serious thought, then gave in. The door closed when she released it, leaving the guards outside. “I’d always heard that Third World people had their own ways...” she began, as she settled onto the chair. I took my own seat, then interrupted her.

“Culturally pure,” I said, “not ‘Third World.’ The current jargon is ‘culturally pure peoples of the world.’” Before she could reply, I added, “I know it’s foolish—there’s nothing any purer about a country’s culture just because the economy hasn’t kept up, and you’ll find the locals who can afford it wearing Levis, drinking Heineken, driving Toyotas, and listening to the New Commissars, same as anywhere else—but ‘culturally pure’ is still the polite term at present.” I shrugged. “It’ll change again next year, in all probability.”

“Culturally pure, then,” she said. “I’d heard that culturally pure nations had their own customs, and that everything would be easier if I went along with what was expected of me, as far as possible. They expected me to come here, almost ordered me to come here, so here I am—but I still think it’s a mistake.”

“You aren’t concerned with the health of the people here?” I asked.

I knew she wasn’t. Nobody ever comes to see if we’re giving the kids their shots. They don’t care about that.

And they don’t seem to know what else WHO has done, here and elsewhere.

“Not directly, no,” she said. “Mr. Raheem, I represent the Gender Issues Group, an international organization dedicated to ensuring the fair treatment of women in all nations, regardless of cultural heritage. I’m concerned with basic human rights, not just health.”

“Isn’t health care a basic human right?” I asked mildly.

“It’s just one,” she said.

“Well, in any case, you’re here,” I said. “Why don’t you start with me? What is it you’re here to do? What is GIG’s agenda?”

“I’m here,” she said, “to see just what the human rights situation is here, to report back to GIG and to make recommendations as to what action, if any, we should take. We maintain an active mailing list of over eleven million names, Mr. Raheem; if we call for a letter-writing campaign or a boycott, sooner or later the governments of the wealthier nations will listen. And when they do, the government here, with that President-for-Life whose face is all over the billboards, will have to listen, as well.”

I nodded politely.

She stared at me. “Do you even understand what I’m talking about?” she demanded irritably.

I smiled. “Don’t let the traditional robes fool you, Ms. Pellegrini,” I said. “I was born and raised in Maryland. Princeton class of ’16, Harvard Med ’21. I know exactly what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t seem very concerned—but then, why should you be? You’re a U.N. doctor, in charge of vaccinating kids against AIDS and measles, and trying to keep the local strain of syphilis from spreading, right?” That old image again. “Why am I talking to you?”

She started to rise, but I held up a hand. “Please, Ms. Pellegrini,” I said, “sit down. Bringing you here was not a mistake. It was quite deliberate. You aren’t the first women’s rights advocate to come here, and I’m sure you won’t be the last.”

She sat again, and waited. I launched into my usual speech.

“You came here to observe women’s circumstances here,” I said, “and just in the brief time you’ve been here, despite the inconvenience of being under armed guard, I’m sure you’ve seen enough to enrage you. Let me mention a few things.”

I ticked them off on my fingers.

“You saw no women in any positions of importance—no women holding any jobs whatsoever, in fact. No female clerks at the airport; no women working as baggage handlers, concessionaires, cab drivers, or even sweepers.

“You saw men lounging around the streets, but no women—not on the sidewalks, not in the markets if you came that way, not anywhere in the city. The men stared at you in a way you probably found insulting and frightening; chances are a few exposed themselves to you, or made lewd gestures. No one bothered you, since your guards had their guns ready, but just the looks must have been unpleasant—and your own guards were looking at you the same way, I saw that in the hall just now.

“Everywhere you looked, you saw billboards, placards, newspapers, and graffiti trumpeting the President’s propaganda—and it’s all offensively sexist. References to our nation’s sons, our young men, our warriors, our fathers—never daughters, women, mothers.

“If you did see any women, they were heavily veiled, walking with eyes downcast, always escorted by at least one armed male, in fact always with male hands on them, guiding and guarding them; some may have been leashed or even chained to their husbands or fathers.

“And if you saw any children at play, you saw only boys.

“And this doesn’t even mention whatever implications you may have seen in the fact that here in this room is the first time since your plane landed that you’ve been out of sight of those four soldiers in the corridor.

“Am I right?”

“You know you are!” she burst out. “I am absolutely horrified—I’d heard that conditions here were a bit backward, but I had no idea...”

I held up a restraining hand.

“Ms. Pellegrini,” I said, “do you know what you didn’t see?”

“I didn’t see women taking their rightful place!”

“Besides that.”

She looked at me in blank anger, and I finally answered my own question.

“You didn’t see starvation. You didn’t see fly-blown bodies in the streets, children bloated with kwashiorkor following your car begging for pennies, men with guns guarding food you wouldn’t offer your dog and having to use those guns.”

“No, the men were guarding me. If you’re going to lecture me about priorities, or boast about how your organization has been too busy...”

“Not exactly.” I sighed. “You didn’t see any real hunger at all, though, did you?”

“No,” she admitted. “So with that solved, Mr. Raheem, it’s hardly time to rest on your laurels, is it?”

“Ms. Pellegrini, do you know any of the local history?”

“I don’t need...” She caught herself. “I know some of it,” she said. “I know about the old empires, and the spread of Islam, and the colonial period, and independence after the Second World War. But that was a long time ago—people don’t have to be trapped by history, they can outgrow it!”

“If they don’t die first,” I agreed.

“What’s your point, Mr. Raheem?”

“My point,” I said, “is that back in the 1990s, there were children dying in the streets here. If you look at the wall behind me, those three marks are bullet holes from the ’95 Insurrection—I’ve preserved them as a reminder. And do you know why there aren’t children starving, now?”

“I presume that the crops have improved. Mr. Raheem, what does this have to do with women’s rights?”

“Crops haven’t improved significantly,” I told her. “Besides, if there was one thing that the last quarter of the twentieth century demonstrated in this part of the world, it was the ability of human beings to outbreed any food supply—or to mismanage it so that people starved amid plenty.”

She had realized, finally, that I was going to explain in my own way; she just waited for me to continue.

I could see from her face that she was determined to hear me out so that she could say she had given me a fair chance, but that she had no intention of being convinced of anything.

“There have been changes here, all right,” I said. “Major changes. But they’ve had nothing to do with food crops; they’re WHO’s doing. We’ve presented the people here with choices, and they’ve chosen.” I stood up. “I’d like to show you something, Ms. Pellegrini.”

She came along, with a barely-tolerant expression plain on her face as I led her out of my office.

In the corridor I waved off the four guards—they didn’t like it, but they stayed clear. One in particular, the man who had stared so insolently, seemed annoyed, and I saw him fingering his weapon, but he backed off.

Of course, they followed us, about fifty feet back, as I led the way downstairs. They stopped, though, at the entrance to the connecting passage to the New Order Hospital—as it was now called; it was the Hope Clinic when I first arrived, and St. Mary’s before that.

These four weren’t allowed in the hospital; that was secure turf, outside their jurisdiction. They waited at the checkpoint.

I could feel the one man staring after us.

By using the tunnel, as we call it, we avoided the regular security check; the guards at the tunnel checkpoint all knew me, and saw that I was with a woman, and let us pass.

Along the way I chatted a little.

“If you’re trained in gender issues,” I said, “I’m sure you remember those studies from the 1980s and ’90s about sex bias in classrooms—that if women contributed more than 15% of the responses in a classroom situation, they were seen as dominating the conversation.”

“I remember,” she said bitterly.

“That was the first real documentation we had of something that’s obvious when you think about it.” I held the door for her; she glared at me, and I said, “You can get the next one, if you like; I’m not being sexist, merely playing the host.”

She wasn’t much mollified.

“As I was saying,” I continued as the door swung shut behind us, “those studies showed that what people see isn’t inequity, it’s deviation from what they’ve experienced in the past. People who have always lived in a particular situation see it as normal, if they perceive it at all. One can’t judge one’s own culture until one has seen something else—if then. Do fish see the water they swim in?”

She ignored the question, just as she was ignoring the intense stares of the white-jacketed men down the corridor.

“You’ll want to remember that when you hear my complete explanation,” I told her. “Here, we need to take the elevator—and you’ll notice that the elevators all work, that there’s reliable electricity, none of which was true twenty or thirty years ago.”

“I should hope things have improved in the past thirty years!” she burst out.

“Oh, but you know, they didn’t improve, for quite some time,” I pointed out. “Between the 1960s and the turn of the century conditions deteriorated badly in much of the culturally-pure world, and for twenty years thereafter improvement was spotty, at best. Up, please.”

She pushed the call button, and the door opened immediately. We stepped in, and I pushed 7.

“Fine,” she said. “So poverty’s been alleviated, the infrastructure is sound, the country’s relatively peaceful—but there are men with guns everywhere, and the women are all kept out of sight. Isn’t it about time to pay some attention to human decency?”

“We do,” I said. “Believe me, we do everything we can for the women here. The men with guns are an essential part of that.”

She made it plain, wordlessly, that she didn’t believe it for a second.

We stepped out on the seventh floor, and I led the way to the maternity ward. The guards at the entrance raised their guns, then recognized me and waved us through. I think one even saluted.

The nurse on duty glanced up at us, then stared. I waved to him and walked on past, leading the way to the nursery window.

“It’s not very clean,” my guest remarked. I shrugged.

“It’s still the Third World,” I said, “whatever they’re calling it this week. And you should have seen it when I first got here.”

Then we looked through the glass at the babies. No one can resist that.

“A lot of empty places,” she remarked. I nodded. There were half a dozen babies, but a score of unused bassinets.

The attending nurse looked up at us through the glass, and I waved to him. He’d known me for years, and he’d seen me bring western women here before.

He waved back.

“You can’t tell by looking,” I said, “but those babies are all boys.”

She glanced at me, then back at the newborns, at their tiny brown fists and squashed-looking faces, and their white blankets and diapers. “They even separate the babies?” she asked. “Where are the girls?”

“They don’t separate the girls,” I told her, slightly annoyed that she hadn’t yet figured it out. “There aren’t any girls. If there were any, they’d be in there, too—with red blankets.”

“Red?” She stared at the white-wrapped infants, then turned to me. Her angry certainty was finally shaken; she looked at me with open puzzlement for the first time.

I nodded. “The color of blood,” I explained.

“And you knew there wouldn’t be any? I assume there’s a point, it’s not just coincidence.”

“It’s not coincidence. It’s what I do. What WHO does.”

For a moment she stared blankly, then I saw the inevitable suspicion form.

“No,” I said. “We don’t murder the girl babies.” I sighed. “We don’t have to. We just give the mothers a choice. That’s all we’ve done since the 1990s—give the mothers a choice.”

She looked at the babies, sudden comprehension dawning. “Sons,” she said. “They all want sons.”

I nodded. “They’re culturally pure—and it’s a culture that measures a mother’s worth in sons, not daughters.” I waved an arm. “Every drugstore in this city sells sex-selective spermicides, half a dozen brands, all U.N.-subsidized—and all of them designed to only kill X sperm, none to kill Y. They’ve got trade names like ‘Only Boys’ and ‘Sons for Certain.’ And we provide free prenatal care to anyone who asks, so long as they permit us to do a genetic analysis of the fetus, and the very first thing we tell them is always the baby’s sex—even before we mention defects, or verify paternity. And yes, we do point out hereditary defects, and yes, we report on paternity—there’s an advertising campaign, telling men to be sure they aren’t supporting another man’s get. About half of all the pregnancies we see wind up in abortion—and we do that for free, too.”

“You’re trying to keep the population down. That’s what you were talking about, with the starving children.”

I nodded.

“And it’s working, right? No one’s starving. So why do you keep it up? And why do you let the women be mistreated?”

I sighed. “No, you still don’t understand. We started this program back in the 1990s, with methods far more primitive than what we have now, and yes, it succeeded—long ago.”

“So you kept people from having too many children—so why...” she began.

I interrupted. “No, no. That’s where the pioneers in population control went wrong. We let people have all the children they want. Sociologists knew back in the 1980s that the best way to convince people not to have too many kids is to make everyone affluent—the poor will always have kids, because they have nothing to lose and much to gain, and besides, most of them will probably die anyway, while the wealthy are generally content with one or two—if they bother to have any at all. In a modern society, kids cost time and money; in a tribal society, sons are wealth. The best way to stop overpopulation is to make everyone well enough off, and modern enough, that kids become an expense rather than an asset. But the poorer countries had too many people, and were increasing the number too fast; there was no way to make them affluent faster than they were breeding themselves back into poverty. Population control had to come first, but there was no practical way to convince the poor not to have children short of shooting them—and nobody was willing to go quite that far.”

“But then...” She stopped, puzzled.

“We told them to have all the children they wanted, Ms. Pellegrini. We even helped them to be sure that they’d have the children they wanted—strong, healthy sons.

“And only sons. We couldn’t stop them from bearing children, but it was easy to convince them to stop bearing daughters.”

She looked at the six babies, in their white blankets.

“We don’t force them,” I said. “We just give them the choice. And sometimes an added incentive—a token payment of a hundred dollars for every son, for example, but never anything for a daughter. And we reinforced the cultural pressures that were already present.”

“But I don’t understand,” she said. “How does that help? You’ll have almost as many babies, won’t you?”

I nodded. “Of course. They did. Thirteen live births per hundred population they had here, in 2000. And eleven of those thirteen were male. And that was thirty years ago. The women who had those babies are out of their childbearing years, and their sons are grown men—and they had no daughters. Or few, anyway.” I gestured at the glass. “That’s why there are no women working at the airport or in the market, no women on the streets, Ms. Pellegrini—there are no women. The population of this country is roughly 85% male, 15% female, and many of those 15% are old, grandmothers and great-grandmothers.”

“But...” She looked at the babies, then at me. “Don’t they realize what they’re doing? They’re still only having sons?”

I nodded. “The population is now dropping steadily—and per capita income is rising steadily. We estimate that if current trends continue we’ll be seeing an actual population crash in another twenty years.”

“But don’t they see? If everything’s improving, don’t they know? You’ve educated them, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes. They know. They’re becoming steadily more educated, more affluent—and the average number of live births per mother has dropped from 4.8 to 2.1 since the turn of the century. Two sons, .1 daughters.”

“But... it’s genocide!”

I shook my head. “It’s free choice. To be honest, I think we’re near bottom now; I expect the trends to shift. The economics are there. Dowries are long gone, of course. A typical bride-price has now reached the low seven figures in American money, and even an ugly prostitute—yes, there are still prostitutes, of both sexes, but the females are all high-priced courtesans, not streetwalkers any more. At any rate, the going price for a roll in the hay with a real woman, as opposed to a transvestite, is around fourteen hundred dollars. I expect parents to begin realizing this—they’ll have a son to carry on the family, and then daughters to sell. So far, though, they haven’t trusted the market to last.”

“Sell?”

I nodded. “Supply and demand. Women are scarce, and that makes them valuable. A girl of six is now considered marriageable. Only a millionaire could afford the traditional polygamy, and the last one to try it was lynched. And of course, that’s one reason that we aren’t seeing daughters—the men who can afford wives don’t need to sell their daughters.”

“Mr. Raheem, this is all appalling!”

“I won’t argue with that,” I said. “But children starving in the street were pretty appalling, too. This was a slow, long-term solution, and it had some drawbacks—but it worked, here and in half a hundred other countries. And the people directly affected don’t seem terribly upset.”

“I can’t believe that,” she said.

I shrugged. “They’ve lived with it all their lives,” I said. “The men here grew up without any sisters or other girls around; they’ve never known anything else. Remember I mentioned those studies about women in the classroom? To the people here, 15% seems the normal percentage of women; most of them can’t imagine a 50/50 society. If you transported them to New York, they’d...well, we don’t have to guess; haven’t you heard foreigners talking about how it seems as if there’s no one in America but women, how our whole civilization is effeminate? Isn’t that one reason that organizations like GIG form in the first place, because it’s so obvious that the rest of the world is so backward about gender issues?”

We’d seen what I wanted to see in the nursery. I turned away from the window. “Come on,” I said. “There’s something else I want to show you.”

She was struggling to absorb it all as we found our way through the corridors, past the guards, to the prenatal care and screening unit.

No patients were in at the moment; the room was empty and dark. I turned on the light and pointed at the big poster.

“I can’t read it,” she said.

I’d forgotten—she was an American. Probably only spoke English.

“It says, ‘Give your daughters a chance to live,’” I explained. “We’ve stopped our original campaign; now we’re trying to swing the balance back toward normal. But it’ll take years—and one reason is that no sane mother would want her daughter to grow up here.”

“But if they all had daughters...”

“But they won’t. No one wants to be first. It’ll happen, though. Once there are a few girls, there’ll be more, and more, and eventually we should get back to normal. Or even swing slightly over toward excess females—and that’ll be fine, because they can be exported to other countries that aren’t as far along. We did our best to encourage isolation here, with propaganda about cultural purity and foreigners carrying diseases, but it’s time to let up on that, too.”

“But if they have daughters, won’t that start the whole thing over again?”

I shook my head as I fished behind the counter for what I wanted. “By then, this country will be advanced and wealthy enough that the birth rate will be harmlessly low.” I found the folder and handed it to her. “You might want to read these,” I said. “It’s transcripts of the interviews with pregnant women—in English, we keep several translations. You can see for yourself the reasons they give for aborting daughters.”

She didn’t really read them, just flipped through enough to convince her that I was telling the truth.

“All right,” she said, “I believe you. The women aren’t being hidden away. But why aren’t any of them working?”

I stared at her in surprise. “Why should they?” I said.

“For personal fulfillment, of course!” she snapped. “Obviously, any woman can land a husband capable of supporting her in comfort, but don’t any of them want to work?”

“Ms. Pellegrini,” I said, “I don’t think you understand.” I gestured at the guards at the door. “What do you think they’re there for? Why do you think you had four armed guards escort you from the airport to my office?”

“I assumed there’s some sort of danger from...from outlaws of some sort,” she said.

I shook my head. “No, just from men,” I said. “Any woman seen in public unguarded is assumed to be asking to be raped—usually gang-raped. Gangs will sometimes carry off any woman they can find. It’s become part of the culture here—these men still have the normal interests, but without the normal outlets. Like sailors, before ships were integrated—when they get a chance at a woman, they take it. As for this place, by its very nature, everyone knows this hospital has women in it. No woman could possibly work at an ordinary job without armed guards around her the entire time.” I sighed. “And an unmarried American woman—there are a million men in this city who would love a chance to seduce you into marriage, and the customary local method of seduction is indistinguishable from rape. The theory is that if one’s sexual prowess is sufficiently impressive, that rape will turn to love. And marrying an American is the next thing to paradise—not only will you gain admission to the third-wealthiest country on Earth, where you’ll have a computer on your wrist and a dozen robots to wait on you, but it’s a country run by women, where you’ll see beautiful women everywhere you turn.”

“That’s utterly appalling,” she said.

I shrugged. “I know.”

“This whole thing is a disgrace, a perversion—it’s sick.”

“Oh, I know. We’ve distorted and destroyed whole cultures here. We’ve created an abomination—and I haven’t even mentioned the inter-tribal raids, the catamites, the desperate attempts at emigration. We were afraid for a time that with all that testosterone we’d be responsible for a major war, but that, at least, never happened—apparently women aren’t a moderating influence at all. If anything, they give men more to fight for. It’s still ghastly—but, Ms. Pellegrini, we averted perpetual famine and got the population under control, which allowed the creation of a stable economy and the preservation of the local environment. And it’s temporary.”

She held up the folder.

“Is it?” she asked.

I didn’t have an answer to that beyond, “We hope so.”

That ended the tour; we rejoined her escort, and I saw her safely to her hotel.

When the hotel staff had learned that an American woman was coming they had, of course, given her the Presidential Suite, and I could just imagine the infighting over who would be providing whatever services she might need.

She saw the faces on the street on the way there. She saw the men at the hotel watching her. She was overweight, like most Americans, and not particularly young or attractive, so far as I could see, but that didn’t matter here.

She saw the faces, and now she knew it wasn’t hatred—it was lust.

An entire country of sailors just in from the sea.

We got her to her room without incident; her luggage had arrived separately, and the guards helped her unpack.

That same one I’d noticed before seemed particularly eager to help, and that worried me, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. Guards are usually chosen very carefully; if possible, the army chooses gay men, who wouldn’t be interested in their charges, just as WHO and the other international organizations do their best to use gay personnel here. If they can’t get gays, they look for eunuchs, or just men who aren’t interested, but sometimes someone has the necessary political connections to land a guard job without any such qualifications.

But he was just one out of four, and what could I do?

As I prepared to leave, she stopped me.

“Will I be safe?” she whispered.

I gestured at the guards.

“That’s the fox guarding the henhouse,” she said, with a quick glance at the suspicious one—clearly, she’d noticed his interest, just as I had. “How do I know I can trust them?”

“That’s why there are four,” I said. “It’s likely at least one will stay loyal, and keep the others in line. And if not—well, they won’t want to hurt you.”

I walked out and closed the door before she could get over her shock sufficiently to react to that last remark.

She probably thought I was just being cruel, that I was angry with her, returning her hostility.

I wish she’d believed me. And I wish I’d been able to do something.

We still don’t know how he managed to kill the other three single-handed; maybe he had help from the hotel staff. A busboy turned up dead as well, so that was probably it. The guard was shot trying to escape, so we couldn’t ask.

She wasn’t hurt, beyond a few bruises and the emotional damage. And she wasn’t interested in talking about it; she took the next plane back to Europe, and I assume she went home to the States from there.

I hope she talks about it there.

I thought she had enough to absorb that first day, so I hadn’t mentioned the problem I wanted her help on. If she’d stayed the three days she had originally planned, I’d have shown her the records of what happened to the last planeload of western women who thought it would be fun to visit a country where there are six men for every female.

Why they expected those men to understand the traditional mating dances of our species, to respect their rights and customs, to tolerate any sort of sexual teasing, I don’t know. It’s hardly a traditional society here.

But at least it’s still a society, not a death camp. I keep telling myself that. And it’ll readjust someday. We haven’t destroyed it forever.

All we did was offer them a choice.

That was all we did, wasn’t it?