

MANUELA

A Novel by Curt A. Canfield

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to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

“Manuela” is the third book in the Will Barnes trilogy. The first book is “The Errors of Mankind” followed by “Better is the End.”

Dedicated to my two mothers:

Helen (Kanuskey) Canfield

Alfreda (Mrowka) Kirpan

CHAPTER 8

It was only a few minutes later that Fadwa showed up, wearing her *keffiyeh*. Sayed and I stood up to greet her while Manuela remained seated. I could see her looking Fadwa up and down intently.

“Well, who is this?” Fadwa returned an equally intense look.

“This is my granddaughter, Manuela. She’ll be starting at Cornell this coming Fall. She wants to become a lawyer.”

“Pleased to meet you, Fadwa. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Yes, please. Some breakfast tea.”

Manuela was momentarily at a loss for words. She glanced over at me expecting some help, but Fadwa smiled and helped. “Breakfast tea is a dark tea. You’ll see a bag of it up front. Twinning’s English Breakfast Tea. Thank you, Manuela.”

Manuela smiled at her and scooted off to get Fadwa’s tea.

Fadwa took a seat at the table, nodded at everybody, and began. “Who would like to begin today? The last time we met, we discussed the possibility of a Sunni Caliphate. Do you know what that is, Will? I know Sayed does.”

I wish she would have waited until Manuela got back. She probably knew more about this than I. “I think the Ottoman Empire was a caliphate. Isn’t that like some kind of theocracy with a religious leader?”

Sayed chimed in. “Yes, Will. The Ottoman Empire was a caliphate. They were Sunni. But it ran into problems with the Young Turks in the early twentieth century when the notion of democracy was sweeping throughout the world. Those Young Turks didn’t care for autocratic rule.

“At the beginning of World War I, Sultan Mehmed V, the caliph of the Ottoman Empire, proclaimed a jihad against the Western Allies during World War I. The Ottoman Caliphate was undercut by the Arab Revolt during the war. You might remember Lawrence of Arabia fought with the Arabs. Anyway, the caliphate ended with their defeat in the war.”

Manuela returned with Fadwa’s tea while Sayed was speaking and sat down. To my surprise, Manuela interjected, “The caliphate almost sounds like the Pope in the Vatican, doesn’t it?”

Fadwa smiled. “If you’re talking about today, I think you would be right. That’s a good point you make, Manuela. Any caliphate would have to be like the Pope. I don’t think anyone would accept a caliph like the Ottoman Empire had.

“Having said that, what do you think about Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt

forming a Sunni Federation of States? They could take in the Palestinians who do not want to live in the state of Israel. Remember, the last time we talked? We said a solution to the current crisis would include Israel taking over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.”

Sayed interjected, “What would this federation do? Would it be like the United States where each state handles its own affairs while the federation handles all inter-state and foreign affairs? That would seem like a good idea to me.”

“Yes, I think that would work, Sayed.” Fadwa seemed pleased that her ideas were taking flight.

Manuela was watching them closely with that laser-focused look of hers, taking it all in. “Boy, this is interesting, *Opa*. Thanks for inviting me.”

Fadwa looked over at me. “What is *Opa*, Will?”

“Oh, it means grandfather in German. It’s a little game between us. Right, *liebchen*?

She gave me a brief smile and then got serious as she looked over at Sayed and Fadwa. “Do you think their caliph should be situated in Jerusalem? It could be set up like the Vatican.”

Fadwa and Sayed looked at her. They were momentarily stymied.

Manuela continued. “I think it would be great if it did. Then, the caliph could focus on religious and moral things. The laity could have their own government within each country. It would be like the Pope speaking to all Catholics across all nations.” She

looked around the table to see how her remarks landed.

“I guess that could work,” Fadwa said. “I suppose all the imams could elect one from their number to fill the position of Grand Imam. But I worry about my people. They want their own state. Without it, I’m afraid the fighting will never stop.”

Manuela look at Fadwa. “Did they ever have their own state. Fadwa?”

“Not *per se*. It was more a geographical location. Foreign governments have been trying to put boundaries around the Palestinians since the early twentieth century but none of them have worked out. Today, many nations and the Palestinians accept Gaza and the West Bank as separate parts of the same Palestinian state. It has been their homeland for centuries. This is why it is so hard for them to accept leaving.”

I decided to weigh in. “Aren’t there Arabs who are citizens of Israel? Don’t they vote and have the same right as the Israelis?”

Fadwa answered. “Yes, that is true. But they face economic and cultural discrimination. They do not stand on equal footing with the Israeli citizens. They want their own state apart from the Israelis, so they won’t have that discrimination. I can speak from experience. It is very real.”

Sayed slammed his hand on the table. “Then their Arab brothers in the Federated States must help them

overcome that discrimination. They must fund their development so they can become economically and culturally free of discrimination in Israel. That, my friends, is the only way this can work, if the Palestinians want to stay in their homeland.”

Fadwa shrugged her shoulders while Manuela and I looked on. “Who knows, my friends? Maybe it will. I think people are tired of fighting. Maybe if they are given outside assistance to build schools and are funded to build up their businesses, it might work. A fat wallet and a full belly goes a long way toward keeping people satisfied.” She stood up and slung her briefcase over her shoulder. “I’m afraid I have to go now. Prior commitments. This was a nice talk. And I enjoyed meeting you, Manuela. Goodbye.”

After fifteen minutes of idle chit-chat with Sayed, we left. When we got in the car, I asked Manuela what she thought about Sayed and Fadwah.

“Oh, Sayed’s nice enough. But I could tell I made him uncomfortable, which is so different from the other guys I meet. They always try to show off and look at me like their next conquest. But at least you know where they are coming from. I kinda got a strange vibe from him.”

“Well, you have to understand the cultural differences, *liebchen*. You might remember I wrote that I worked for an oil company in Saudi Arabia. Your grandmother was there with me. Women had to be very careful once they went outside the company

compound. If they didn't cover their hair, the religious police would spray paint their hair and loudly berate them in Arabic."

"Religious police? Wow! She never told me about that. Well, you'll never catch me going over there. No thank you."

I smiled at her as I started the car. "Well, they have their ways, and we have ours. Who's to judge?"

"To each their own. Right, *Opa*?"

"Right, *liebchen*. What about Fadwa? Did you like her?"

She took a moment to think. Her face turned serious. "Well, she strikes me as very smart, but something about her is unsettling. I don't know what it is. But I think that neither of them feel entirely at home here. It must be tough for them in a totally different society."

"I think so. It's funny, though. When I was in Japan, I tried my best to assimilate and learn everything I could about them. I don't think Sayed or Fadwa feel that way." I thought for a minute. "I don't know if it's just them or me."

Manuela's face took on a thoughtful expression. "Hmm. Maybe the difference is that the Japanese were willing to help and encourage you. The ones I've met in school are very polite and gracious. I don't think everybody here is like that, especially after 9/11 and all this immigration trouble. But who knows?"

“Well, you’re right, *liebchen*. It’s a two-way street,. I tried my best to be get along with them when I was in Japan and they treated me well. But they weren’t treated well by the West after Perry opened up their country for trade. People can get pushed so far and then they push back. Guaranteed. I wish that we all could just get along and respect one another.”

“Amen to that, *Opa*.”

PART II

Winter 2024 to early Summer 2025

CHAPTER 9

Cynthia and Manuela spent the next couple of days shopping. Cynthia wanted to make sure that Manuela had all the fall fashions for her freshmen year. I was feeling worse than I usually did. I wanted to stay home and relax. Things weren't looking good for me.

The night before Manuela was set to leave, Cynthia told me she had seen a change in Manuela since her first visit. She did not seem as fragile as she had been on her first visit. She was more comfortable with us and confident in her future at Cornell. She spoke endlessly about attending her freshman classes and her coming visit in late Summer to get ready for school. On the night before Manuela left, Cynthia told her to think about how she wanted to decorate her bedroom, which was really a suite with its own bathroom and walk-in closet. When she came back in the summer, they could work on that, including painting the room if she liked.

On the morning of her last day, I invited her into my study. It was at the other end of the house from

the family room and the guest bedroom. It was her first time there. I generally kept the door closed. She stopped in her tracks as I opened the door.

“Of my God, *Opa*. You have so many books!” She also glanced over at the line of pill bottles next to my computer.

“Quite an assortment, isn’t it *liebchen*?” She flushed with embarrassment. “I meant the pills. Well, they’re keeping the old guy alive.”

“Don’t talk that way, *Opa*. You’re going to be there for my graduation from law school.”

I stifled a loud laugh. “I hope so. Well, this will be your study room in the evenings. I’ll get all my work done during the day while you’re at school.” I walked over to the wall of bookshelves and her eyes followed me. “Over here are the history books; they’re all about ancient Rome, twentieth century Europe, Asia, and the US. Over here are my religious and philosophy books. I started reading those after my stroke.”

I walked her to the inside of my wooden, U-shaped desk “You can use these two parts to spread out your work and your laptop. My only request is to leave my desktop computer alone.” It sat on the other leg of the U along with my laptop and pills.

“Why do you have two PCs?”

I laughed at her question. “The laptop has a very eclectic mix of songs. I use that while I work. I love music. And iTunes slows down my desktop terribly.”

“Do you mind if I use your books, *Opa*?”

”Not at all.” I watched her eyes as she looked over the rows of books. I felt like I was passing down my life’s work to her. I rubbed the nascent tears from my eyes. She was leaving today. I had only known her for a short time, yet she had become such a part of my life. I hope I made it to her next visit in July.

“Oh, one more thing. Here’s a proof copy of my second book. You can read it on the flight home. Don’t be disappointed in me for the things that happened in my early years.”

“I won’t, *Opa*. We all make mistakes. Jesus understands that. As long as we recognize them and atone for them, he’s cool with that.”

She gave me that broad smile of hers, then she came over to hug and kiss me on the cheek. And then I saw that she was our family’s anointed one. She grew up without any of the crap that I had lived with. She didn’t seem to have any of the anger, fear, or shame that I had when I was her age. *Alhamd lilah*. That was something I heard a lot in Saudi Arabia. It means thanks be to God.

When Manuela arrived in Sacramento later that evening, she sent a message telling me everything was okay. I was already in bed. My energy level was at the bottom of the tank by early evening each day now. The next day, she called to thank me again for allowing her to stay with us. What she said next surprised me. I forgot that I had wrote the first part of the book before we met.

“*Opa*, I got up to Chapter 14 and then crashed on the plane. I was so tired. Changing time zones is really tough. But I did see the first page of Chapter 14. It opened with a pretty horrible conversation between you and my dad. I only overheard parts of that, but not this! I never saw that side of him. Did he really say all that stuff?”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to ruin her image of her father, but I wrote the truth. And it was a horrible conversation. He was angry with me. He was my son, but it was the first time I had spoken with him. In fact, I had just learned of his existence. My ex-wife never told me that she was pregnant when we divorced.

“He did, *liebchen*. Try to understand how he felt. He was raised thinking that I ran out on his mother and I’m pretty certain my father didn’t help that situation any. I’m glad that you were never exposed to that side of your father or mine. I think you should keep the book away from him.”

There was silence on her end. I wasn’t sure if she was questioning talking to her father about it or holding it inside. I felt bad about putting her in the middle. “Listen, Manuela. I know you must feel torn between telling your dad or not. Whatever you do, do what you feel is right. Keep your personal integrity, *liebchen*. Be true to yourself. Remember your father is one way with some people and another way with others. He may change his views on me someday. You never know. But do what you think is right.”

“Thank you, *Opa*. I won’t mention it to him. And, as soon as I finish the draft, I’ll get rid of it if it’s all right with you.”

“It is. Let me know when you finish and then we can talk about it, okay? Take your time. I know you have schoolwork.”

“As you always say, sounds like a deal.”

The next three weeks passed quickly. I lost about fifteen pounds and was growing increasingly weak. I tried to keep up with my household chores, but it was becoming increasingly challenging. Cynthia noticed and tried to help. Even Mabel seemed to notice that something was afoot. She would jump up on my lap, crawl up my chest and look into my eyes as if to say I know you know you’re not well.

After those three weeks passed, Manuela called. “Hello, *Opa*. I finished the book. Wow! How can you write a book that is both so sad and inspiring? It’s so-o-o different from the first book. In the first book, it was like you were trying to understand yourself to find some peace. Then in this one, you had to understand the harm you did to others and make amends to them to find lasting peace. It was amazing to read, *Opa*. I wonder how many other people go through that?”

“Well, you summed it up pretty well, *liebchen*. But to answer your question, some people don’t feel a need to go through that process. Maybe they lived a good life and don’t feel the need, or maybe they lived a bad life and simply don’t care.”

There was a long pause. “I have to tell you something, *Opa*.”

“What is it?”

“My mom found the draft and read it. I didn’t know it until she finished. I kept it hidden in my wardrobe under some clothes. I thought it was safe, but she must have found it somehow. She said, ‘your grandfather is a strange man. He has been through some trials and tribulations in his life. But by the end of this book, I believe he was blessed with a pure heart, and it finally came out.’ I told her about your condition and now she wants to come along when I visit you in July. She would like to meet you and see where I am staying. Do you think that would be all-right?”

“I would have to ask your *Oma*, but I think it would be. Do you two mind sharing a room?”

“No, not at all!”

I could hear the excitement in her voice. I think she was happy for a number of reasons. First, it would draw her family closer to mine and possibly help ease Hector’s grudge. Secondly, her mother could see where her daughter would be staying for the next four or more years. And third, Manuela told me her mother was very religious and believed in the power of prayer; perhaps she thought both of their prayers over me could do something to delay my death. I didn’t know about that. I don’t think I was ready for anybody praying over me. I had already accepted my death.

Months passed after that call. Her calls became less frequent as she was all tied up with school events in addition to her forthcoming graduation and prom. I was also bogged down with fighting my cancer and inflammation. I slept longer. I found it harder to concentrate on anything for any length of time. During this time, my second book was finally published and received glowing reviews, but it brought me little joy. I started work on a third book, but I was lucky to finish a page a day. At this rate I doubted that I would be able to finish it.

Winter came and went. Spring arrived and Manuela was excited that soccer season had begun. She was enjoying captaining her team. They were heading toward district finals. She was also doing well heading her Forensics team. She was the most balanced, laser-focused young woman I had ever known. I truly hoped that nothing would ever disrupt her vision, determination, or happiness. I know tragedy falls into everybody's lap. My condition was probably the first setback in her life, yet she seemed to have the faith to see it through. In any event, I always tried to downplay it as much as possible during our calls.

It was early in May when Manuela called to tell us she was the class Valedictorian. She was going to be the commencement speaker at graduation. She was gushing. She asked me to read her speech when she finished drafting it. I was happy to agree. It was a week later when she sent me a draft.

It was a different kind of inspirational speech. She wrote it for her peers who were mostly poor Hispanic kids. She began by going back to the origins of Spanish settlement in the New World. She recounted how they got to where they are today, from the bravery of the conquistadores who travelled to a new world about which they knew nothing to the greed, brutality, and persistence both they and the Indigenous peoples displayed in fighting one another. But she wrote this was nothing new in the world. It had been going on for centuries and still goes on today. I wondered if she was inspired by Fadwa and the Palestinian struggle. She told all of them to look back on that and see what it had gotten them today.

She wrote that she would keep the bravery and persistence that both the conquistadores and the Indigenous people displayed but toss out the greed and brutality that ended their empires. She wrote “it’s time for a new generation of humanity to understand the errors of the past, to work hard for what they want, and to hold onto their beliefs in eternal principles and practice them.”

She continued with: “You think everything came easy for me? It didn’t. This is what was drilled into me every day by my father to do better. If I slacked off, he let me know it in no uncertain terms and cut off one privilege after another until I got back in line. But it was not just bravery and persistence that got me here. It was also mercy and a belief in God. If I didn’t have

my *Mamá* to comfort me each night, I don't know what I would have done. She told me better things were ahead for me, to have faith and trust in God. And I did. And here I stand. And I wish all of you could stand with me.

“My grandfather is a writer. Maybe you never heard of him, but he had a good friend who was an Auschwitz survivor. She told him that mercy and forgiveness come to those who love God and are repentant. But if anyone can't or won't ask for His forgiveness, then that person is refusing God's love and won't receive God's mercy. Instead they will receive the strict justice of God's wrath. And that strict justice will be retaliation. To put it another way, if you love God and follow his eternal principles, there's no need to worry. He will always forgive you and show you mercy. If you don't love God, then you're on your own.”

She went on to warn them of the dangers of instant gratification, be it drugs, alcohol or impulse buying with credit cards. She asked the class if it was worth buying a \$100 shirt with a credit card to satisfy your desires to look good, then paying 22% in interest each month, which equaled \$22, until the credit balance was zero. And then she asked if having sex outside of marriage to feel good was worth a lifetime of living with the mental anguish of having an abortion or raising a child on their own. I read on until I stopped at her closing.

She wrote that, “As of July 1, 2023, the Latino population was 19.5% of the total population in the US. It was the second-largest racial or ethnic group. Whites were 58%. The Latinos were the fastest growing. It’s up to us to help keep this country going strong. It’s up to us to practice those traits of bravery and persistence and believe in those eternal principles of God. Let’s show this country that we’re the new generation. Let’s show them that this generation embraces everything good that this country was founded on while shunning everything bad. Check out history. You’ll see it time after time with either one person or an empire that started out good but ended badly due to greed and brutality toward others. *Señoras y caballeros*, we can either rise on these principles and be successful or we can fail by pursuing short-term pleasures.”

And that was the end of it. I sat and thought about this speech. It was not so different from the one I heard at my high school graduation. But I just wanted to get out of high school and didn’t really listen. I wanted to get on with my enlistment in the Marines and went through many “trials and tribulations.” It took me fifty-five years to reach the level of understanding that Manuela expressed now. I smiled because there was no telling how far she can go.

