Wide Open Air

by

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Raihan and the Tale of the Friend

Two months after Raihan came back from Bangladesh alone, his work asked him to take a temporary leave of absence. They called it a ‘wellness vacation’, but basically it amounted to three weeks without pay. Raihan wasn’t totally surprised. Several of his coworkers had filed complaints saying that he was prone to unpredictable bouts of rage. Some said he was just plain depressed, and no wonder, given that awful thing no one wanted to talk about. But work was work, they said, and really he was lucky in a way. If he had been someone less valuable like, say, administrative staff instead of an engineer, the higher ups might have fired him.

“But what exactly am I supposed to do for three whole weeks?” Raihan didn’t bother hiding that he was pretty annoyed about it all. Fortunately, Gary from HR was unflappable.

“Oh, absolutely anything,” Gary said effusively. “Travel, write a book, take up painting, photography. You know what I would do if I were you?” Gary gave the top of his desk a playful slap. “Bikram yoga. Or climb Mount Rainer! Cross that one off the bucket list, ammi right?”

Raihan sat very still in the grey office chair on the other side of Gary’s desk. He dug his fingernails into the plastic foam armrests. Clearly Gary was mistaking him for some sort of white neo-hippie. Raihan doesn’t believe in the restorative powers of time away from work. He believes in ignoring problems until they start to fit, wearing them in
like bad shoes you can’t return. “Well,” he said at last. “I guess I have a camera. And
ever since college, I’ve kept a list of national parks I want to see.”

“There you go”, Gary said encouragingly. “Get yourself some R&R. You
deserve it.”

That same day Raihan went home and, for lack of anything else to do, began to
prowl through the house for his camera bag. Raihan’s belongings had a tendency to
disappear ever since he had married Samreen a year ago. He had recently found his
precious comic book collection squirreled away in the attic. Another time he confronted
Samreen after trying for hours to find his old racquetball equipment. She had just come
through the front door, and at the tone in his voice she narrowed her eyes and cocked a
hand to her hip despite the numerous shopping bags dangling from her arm. “What is
this? I come home and the first thing you do is give me trouble?” Samreen’s flair for
posturing and melodrama had started to irritate Raihan, although initially it had been part
of her appeal. She was beautiful, mercurial, far out of his league. She was like a prize he
had won through their rocky two month courtship. Though it had helped that her mother
said she would be a fool to turn him down—nice boy, good family, great job, born in
Bangladesh, citizenship in America. In the end, Samreen had seemed convinced.

Now Raihan was tempted to send her an angry message: Where the hell did you
put my camera bag? But she was still at her parents’ house in Bangladesh, probably
asleep, presumably recuperating from their ordeal. Though Raihan was unclear when, if
ever, she would be coming back.

Eventually Raihan found the camera bag in the bedroom closet, stuffed behind
some paisley blue bedsheets that he’d never seen before. He dumped the bedsheets on
the floor, took the camera bag into the kitchen, set it on the table, and popped the plastic clasp. He sat down, took the lenses out, and cleaned them one by one. He flicked away dust motes with a brush, wiped away smears with a felt tip lens pen. He lined the lenses up on the table. His zoom, 50mm pancake, fisheye, wide angle. All around him the house was deathly quiet and, noticing for the first time the dirty dinner plates around the table, the empty wooden fruit bowl, the fine layer of dust on everything, Raihan felt a sudden need to break something. Shaking, he put his lenses back into the bag and went to bed.

The next day he went to Walmart to buy a tent and a camping stove. If he was going to do this, he decided, he was going to do it cheap.

So far, Raihan has only made it to one national park. This rain slogged campground huddled against the continental divide is part of Glacier National Park, hardly nine hours from Seattle. He spends his days driving through the park in his minivan, looping around glassy lakes, ascending and descending hairpin turns with dramatic overlooks of glacially sculpted mountainsides. He stops occasionally to take pictures. He hasn’t figured out how to set up his tent, so he sleeps on the floor of his minivan in a rat nest of blankets, the whispery tent material bunched up beneath his head as a pillow. He wakes up late every day and the campground is bright, so he rips a few paisley blue bedsheets into curtains and hangs them around the minivan with paperclips and string.

In the absence of his normal routine, he rapidly becomes disgusting. He showers only once, at a YMCA in Whitefish an hour’s drive away. He eats canned and
prepackaged food, occasionally splurging on frozen chuck steaks, which he purchases from an overpriced supplies store and then pan fries on his camping stove. On days when it rains, which is often, he lies in the back of the minivan with the doors open and he stares at the ceiling. He scratches dandruff out of his hair. He listens to the rain drumming on the sheet metal roof.

He is at his campsite one night, his camera pointing up at the sky, trying to catch the Milky Way through the black tops of pine trees, when a girl with a purple headlamp walks out of the darkness. “Trying to shoot the stars?” she says cheerfully. “You know there’s an app for that.” She takes her phone out and shuts off her headlamp. In the sudden darkness, Raihan sees a tiny glowing map of stars that shifts as the girl pans across the horizon. She manipulates a scroll bar at the bottom of the screen, forward into the future, backward into the past, and the universe wheels through time. The girl, who is in her twenties and wearing a beanie with cat ears, beckons him closer to see. He leans over her shoulder. She smells of grass and, strangely, of talcum powder. Raihan entertains a brief fantasy of having sex with her. They will sit on the logs at his campsite and have a heartfelt conversation. He will say something charming and winsome. She will say she’s getting cold. He will offer her a blanket. Etc. Instead what happens is she says goodbye with the same cheerful tone that she arrived, and Raihan crawls into the back of his minivan to masturbate. In the morning, he drives to the visitor center for wifi and he downloads the app.

Night photography turns out to be the best thing that’s happened to him in months. He starts taking pictures of the stars from a pontoon dock on Lake MacDonald. During the day, the dock is hectic with tourists from the nearby Glacier Lodge. Day
hikers, kayakers, large families with whiney children. But at night it’s quiet and dark. The shoreline firs crowd around the inlet. The lake reflects stars like a mirror. Raihan spends long hours on the dock with his camera, trying to get the perfect shot of the stars swirling around in the sky. And when the wind turns cold, or animal sounds draw near through the forest, Raihan feels a shiver of fear. He considers that he might die out here, perhaps mauled by a mountain lion or disappeared into the wilderness, and nobody would know. He repeatedly imagines himself blinked out of existence, and he finds a strangely reassuring thought mixed in with his self-pity: that without him the world would continue as it always has.

His third night shooting from the dock, he goes early to Glacier Lodge to charge his phone. The lodge is in the style of a grandiose swiss chalet. It has a triple gabled roof, cheerful white weatherboarding, and dark wooden trim. Once inside, Raihan settles into a massive oak chair in a corner of the lobby with his camera bag and tripod. The lobby is a strange mix of the formal and informal, the wide lofted ceiling and floating paper lanterns presiding over an under-dressed crowd of chatty young families with babies and toddlers. Raihan uses the lodge’s wifi while he waits for his phone to charge. He checks e-mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, the news. Samreen hasn’t sent him any messages from Bangladesh, but he sees that she has posted a picture of herself on Instagram. She is dressed up in a blue shalwar kameez and, for no apparent reason, posing like a wanna-be model on her mother’s couch in Dhaka. Her long black hair is draped over her shoulder, the arch of her back is feline and coy, she is turned sideways with the shalwar tight around her bottom half, and the round shapes of her legs show
clearly through the slick blue cloth. Raihan sets his phone aside. By the fireplace, across the lobby, some little kids are doing a jigsaw puzzle on a faux bear fur carpet. On a leather sofa in the middle of the room a young couple is taking turns reading to their daughter from a children’s book about trees. Raihan represses the inexplicable urge to tell all these happy healthy people to go fuck themselves. Instead he observes that it is dark enough outside to see the stars. He gathers his things and leaves.

From the back of the lodge, he follows a cobble stone path through a stunted rose garden. The air is bracing and cold. In the moonless night, darkness descends abruptly as he starts down the short dirt path through the forest. He stumbles on tree roots and shallow rises in the earth. Mosquitoes whine around his ears. But as he plunges forward, his eyes gradually adjust. He feels reckless and glad to be alone. As he approaches the lake, the trees thin out, the starlight filters through, and the lake in the distance gives off a faint metallic sheen.

He doesn’t see the dark form hunched on the dock until he is almost there. At first he mistakes it for a bear. There is something massive and malevolent, even violent, in the way it waits for him. Then he sees the way the head moves, lifting up and slightly to the left in a distinctly human motion. As he gets closer, he realizes it is an enormous man perched on a folding chair. Raihan takes a few hollow steps onto the dock and the man turns with a fishing pole in one hand. They stare at each other, their faces obscured by night.

“Hi,” says Raihan.

“Hi,” says the man, his voice weirdly cheerful in the darkness.
“I was going to take some pictures.” Raihan gestures lamely with his tripod at the lake, the mountains, the stars.

“Oh, right,” says the man, as if he is supposed to know this. “Let me make some room for you.” Without getting up, the man shifts his feet to one side and starts scoothing the chair beneath him with sharp scraping sounds. The outline of his fishing pole, which looks like a child’s toy in his hand, swings wildly back and forth. “There,” he says. The pale blotch of his face looks back at Raihan. “I know what you must be thinking, running into a behemoth like me in the middle of the night. I’m harmless though, I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.” He makes a crossing motion over his chest with his hand. “You on the other hand. You could be a serial killer. I’m going to need some serious reassurances before you get any closer.”

Raihan is barely five feet tall. The man seems almost twice as big as him.

“Ha ha,” says Raihan. He comes up the dock and draws alongside the man. He avoids staring directly at him while he sets up his tripod, but out of his peripheral vision he sees that the man is sitting splay legged on his chair. Against the sky and the lake, he is a dark mountain of flesh, and Raihan, standing next to him on the narrow dock, is squeezed for space. Feeling the need to say something, Raihan asks, “Catch any fish?”

“Not a damn one,” the man says cheerfully. “I don’t even have a hook or bait on this thing. I was in my hotel room and they had one of those mini refrigerators with all the itty bitty bottles. I’m an alcoholic, unfortunately. Sober three years and seven months. But I started to get the feeling that today might be the day. So I bought this thing at the gift shop.” He gives the fishing pole a jiggle. “And, well, here I am.”
Raihan pauses, his camera in both hands. “How long have you been here exactly?”

“A couple of hours. Actually, maybe five or six. It was bright when I got here and, wow, geez, I guess it’s gotten pretty dark.” The man looks around him with one hand over his brow, clowning the motions of a lookout scout. “What do you think? Would you say it’s gotten dark?”

“Shit,” says Raihan. “You’re completely crazy, aren’t you?”

Raihan means this partially as a joke. He wants the man to chuckle and say something funny and self-deprecating. Instead the man falls quiet and stares across the lake, or maybe at his fishing pole. “No,” he says. “No, I’m not crazy.”

Raihan is trying to figure out what to say next, when the man turns to him and sticks out a massive hand. “I’m Morris, by the way.” His tone is cheerful again.

Raihan shifts his camera to his left hand, and warily extends his right. “Raihan.”

To his surprise, the man shakes his hand gravely, almost delicately.

“Nice to meet you.” Morris gives him a grin, the wet ivory of his teeth revealing itself in the dark. He turns back toward the lake. “So, Reehan. Rahin? Rihan? Sorry. Am I saying that right?”

Raihan busies himself with his camera—setting the aperture, attaching the cable clicker—in hopes of ending their conversation. “Rai like Rice. Han like Han Solo.”


“Just a wife.”

“Ha! Can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em. Right?”

“Yep.” Raihan cracks his knuckles.
“What kind of name is Raihan anyway, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“It’s Bangladeshi.”

“Bangladesh, huh? I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone from Bangladesh. Is that a Muslim country? And given our current political climate, I feel like I should say that I don’t hate Muslims. Isn’t that awful that I have to say that?” Morris is watching Raihan out of the corner of his eye, but rather than making him seem sly, there is something eager and imploring about him, as if he were desperate to make a friend.

“Actually I live in Seattle,” Raihan says curtly. “But yes, yes, it is.”


Seeing that they’re done talking, Raihan mounts his camera on the tripod and presses his face to the viewfinder. He composes a variation of the same shot he’s taken the last two nights in a row: he puts the lake in the foreground, the mountains in the distance, the concentric circles of star trails anchored around the north star in the upper right hand corner. He is hoping that tonight, in the hour and a half before moonrise, it will be dark enough for the stars to reflect clearly in the water.

“You know, I was in the military.”

“Sorry?”

“I said, I used to be in the military. I thought you should know.”

“Why would I want to know that?”

Morris shrugs. “It just seemed like something I should confess. You know, expunge my sins, given your religious views.”
“My religious views?” Raihan laughs a little crazily. “If you want to know my religious views, let’s start with the fact that I haven’t been to a mosque in six or seven years.”

“Well, okay, okay,” Morris continues, “so you’re not the most religious guy. But you’ve still got a Muslim perspective, right? And in some ways that’s even better because I imagine being a secular Muslim gives you a clearer perspective on certain issues.”

Raihan does not respond to this. He has the strange sensation that Morris and he are locked in a battle of wills, but over what exactly, he doesn’t know. Maybe the limited room on the dock, or the peace and solitude that seem equally scarce. He double checks the composition and, wanting to just get things done, snaps the shutter open with the cable clicker. He sets the timer on his watch and is about to step away, to pace the back end of the dock where there is space for him to breathe, when Morris clears his throat.

“It’s just, I can tell you’re a decent guy, Raihan, and right now I could really use a Muslim perspective. One might even say it’s providential that we’ve run into each other.”

Raihan imagines running at Morris and kicking him into the water. He immediately feels bad. There is something pitiable about Morris and his false cheer, his obvious depression. “Okay,” says Raihan. “Why not. I’ve got thirty minutes before my shot is done. Clearly something’s bothering you and somehow it has to do with Muslims. Am I right?”

“That’s right. Exactly right. Already very perceptive. See?” Morris bobs his head. “Although it isn’t about me so much as a friend of mine named Chris who was
stationed with me at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, which by the way is a total dump, probably the last place you ever want to take that wife of yours on vacation, ha ha.” Morris sits up straight, and takes a slow breath. He sets his fishing pole down on the dock. “What I’m trying to tell you, Raihan, is that my friend Chris and me were at Creech working on something called RPA’s. You might know them as drones.” Morris looks sideways at Raihan.

“I know what drones are,” says Raihan.

Morris nods agreeably. “Sure you do. I mean, with your background, I figured… well, everyone’s got some kind of opinion about drones nowadays, but at the time no one really knew much about them. People still don’t know much, to tell you the truth, Raihan. Me and Chris were techs. We operated the sensory equipment on the drones. Cameras, infrared, and so forth.”

Morris shifts in his chair. His voice turns gravelly and low. “I was a pretty good tech, but my friend Chris was a natural. When the Pentagon started ramping up the drone program in the late aughts there weren’t enough technicians, so sometimes we had to work ten hour shifts, six days a week, and Chris could do that while managing two, even three drones at a time. Once, Chris and me were assigned to escort a convoy. As an escort, your main job is threat detection, and mostly that means finding IED’s. You look for these little spots like donuts with an eye in the middle where the jihadis have melted out the road to dig the IED in. So I’ve got my eyes glued to the highway ahead of this massive convoy, about seventeen vehicles total. Chris is double checking all the data and visuals we’ve got coming through. The convoy is chugging along over this wide desolate plain the color of orange sherbet. On one of his screens, Chris has pulled up the infrared
of a ridge alongside the highway and he’s kind of leaning forward in his chair. ‘That ridge should be blazing hot’, he says. I look over, and sure enough, the ridge should be hotter than ambient temperature, but it’s actually a few degrees cooler in certain spots.

“A normal tech might not have said anything. For all we knew, those anomalies could just be some natural variation, maybe different thermal properties in the rocks. But Chris contacts our remote operations CO who’s stationed somewhere in Pakistan, and the CO contacts the captain commanding the convoy in Afghanistan. Chris tells them what we’re seeing, and everyone agrees that there’s some risk, but the captain on the ground says their mission parameters are to continue proceeding to destination.”

Morris has turned slightly so his back is to Raihan. He is looking across the lake, and his head lists to one side so that starlight shines dimly through the crown of his thinning hair. “Turns out it really is a trap. The jihadis have everything under camo and when the convoy is right below them, they just open up. One second it’s desert, the next minute it’s crawling. They’ve got maybe forty shooters and a heavy machine gun emplacement. The convoy is ready thanks to Chris’ early warning, and they’re firing back with everything they’ve got. The only real problem is that the jihadis have this missile battery behind the ridge, out of the convoy’s line of fire. The missile battery looks like it was slapped together from spare parts and they’ve loaded it onto the back of a pick up truck, if you can believe that. They're firing it blindly over the ridge. You ever play that game battleship, Raihan? Well, it was just like that. The missiles are flying wide of the convoy, but it's only a matter of time before they start getting it right. Chris tells our CO about these jihadis in the back of the truck, and the CO gives us the order. The pilot fires the actual missile, but it's our job to keep it on track for the couple of
seconds before it hits. So we’ve got our eyes on these three guys, two of them standing in the bed of the truck, and another guy standing on the ground beside them, when the Hellfire strikes. The two guys in the back of the truck are obliterated, Raihan. Just gone. The screen lights up for a second and then there's nothing left of them. But the third guy must have only gotten partly blown up, because when I think back to that moment I swear I could see a torso or something beside the metal wreck of the truck—but that wasn't until later. The moment after that thing hits, I’m practically jumping out of my chair. I don’t know why I’m laughing, but I am. I’m laughing my ass off. I’m slapping Chris a high five, and I can tell he’s proud of himself, but Chris was always the consummate professional, not a goofball like me, so he just sits there with a smile, reading impact visuals and double checking for new threats.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that my friend Chris was kind of a model for me. A lot of people felt that way. At the time we helped save that convoy, I was already pretty old by Air Force standards. I’d been planning to retire as soon as my pension vested. But Chris was in it for the long haul. Said he believed too much in the good that we were doing. Which is why I was surprised to find out he was dishonorably discharged just a few months after I retired.”

Raihan is crouched at the edge of the dock, peering into the lake. The water is so clear that even in the dark, he can see the glint of stones four or five feet down, and on the surface of the water he can see his own silhouette against the pinpricks of stars. When Morris stops talking, Raihan stands. “Well? What happened to him?”

Morris stirs in his chair. He turns to Raihan and his eyes are frighteningly blank, as if he has forgotten where he is. Then recognition flashes. He turns away, looking
again across the lake. “What happened is that on one of their missions my friend Chris was told to fire on a house, a shack really, with a chicken coop made of sticks on one side and a rabbit hutch attached to the other. All he has to do is guide the missile to target. But at the last second, he sees a kid. He’s been told that there's only militants on site. Other members of his squad have been surveilling the house for the last 48 hours, watching who goes in and who comes out. But there it is, Raihan, a tiny glowing human being on his infrared, coming around the corner with six steaming cups of tea on a tray just before the screen goes incandescent white.

“At first it doesn't really have an effect on him, it doesn't really hit him, you see? He just sits there in his chair and says, ‘Holy shit. Did we just kill a kid?’ They continue the mission, and at dinner that day in the mess hall Chris tells the rest of the squad that they accidentally killed a kid. But here's the thing. No one believes him. His CO and the RPA pilot say they didn't see anything. The other techs say he must have been imagining it. So he tries to get approval for the footage to be released to him for review, only it's a bureaucratic nightmare. Different people tell him he's got to fill out various forms and submit them to various people for signature. He starts writing impassioned e-mails and telling his superiors that the use of deadly force against a child wasn't authorized. Stuff like that. And, frankly, he has no idea what he's talking about. Suddenly he’s just a peon, a little cog in a big machine.”

Morris shakes his head. “I was retired by then, like I said, but I started hearing a bunch of rumors that were hard to believe. That Chris got into a fistfight with our squad leader. That he went on a hunger strike, but nobody knew why. That one night the military police found him pouring gasoline around the RPA trailers without even a match
or a lighter in his pockets. Just five big jerry cans that he kept pouring and pouring in circles around the trailers. One thing I know for certain, because all our mutual friends agree. After his discharge was finalized, Chris went back to his barracks and tried to kill himself by slitting his wrists with a razor blade. Only, Chris cut himself across the veins. If you really want to kill yourself like that, you’ve got to cut yourself laterally, up and down the wrist, so you bleed out before people start to get suspicious and knock down the bathroom door to save you. After I heard all this, I tried reaching out to Chris a few times, but it’s been years now and he’s never written me back. I hear that he’s somewhere in Idaho, probably real close to here, working odd jobs, living alone.

“If I had to guess, I think maybe he started to see the humanity in all those people we killed—and, Raihan, I have to say, they were certainly all Muslim people. So the thing I want to know, Raihan, is whether or not my friend Chris was right. Because personally I think that we were heroes, or at least Chris was, to me. But I can see that from another perspective, maybe from a Muslim perspective, some of the things we did were wrong. So, that’s what I want to know from you. Are we really such terrible bastards? What do you think, Raihan?”

The timer on Raihan’s watch has been steadily counting down since Morris started talking. It has just ticked past seventeen minutes and fifty six seconds. The stars in the sky have spun three-point-seven degrees around their center point Polaris. Raihan’s camera, sitting stolidly on its tripod, continues to suck light into its frame, although a faint breeze has sprung up and spoiled the reflection in the lake—he will have to come back another night to get his perfect shot. But Raihan has mostly forgotten this.
“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” he says.

“Just an honest opinion.”

“Okay. Well, then fuck these people. That’s what I say. Fuck these terrorist assholes. What I don’t get though is why you’re so conflicted about all this.”

Morris shifts his weight and the chair beneath him creaks. “What do you mean?”

“I mean this is the reason you’re out here? Because after killing a bunch of terrorists you accidentally killed one little girl?”

“No. I’m out here because I’m an addict with a drinking problem. We’re talking about my friend Chris here, not me.”

“That’s another thing. I think Chris doesn’t really exist. I think you made him up.”

Morris laughs humorlessly. There is an edge of anger in his laugh. “I asked for a Muslim perspective, I didn’t think you’d be some kind of conspiracy theorist. Are all Muslims so paranoid?”

Raihan’s fingernails are biting into the flesh of his palms. His shoulders feel tight around his neck. “Okay. You asked, and that’s what I think.”

“I just don’t know what you’re talking about.” Morris laughs again.

“I think you do though.”

Morris ruefully shakes his head and chuckles, but he doesn’t say anything more. In the silence, Raihan cracks his knuckles one by one.

“Okay. Let me tell you a story then,” says Raihan.

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One night, a man and his wife are heading to a dinner at a bistro in an upscale neighborhood of Dhaka. The man is annoyed at his wife for a number of reasons. First, they came to Bangladesh purely for the wife’s cousin’s wedding. Second, they consequently spent the past week in the company of the wife’s relatives, whom the man does not particularly like. And third, the couple they’re meeting for dinner are primarily friends of the wife. Suffice it to say, the man feels he has earned the right to sit this one out, especially the night before their flight back to America, and he says as much while he yanks the steering wheel left and right, dodging around rickety bicycle rickshaws and little three-wheel CNG’s on Dhaka’s crowded streets. The wife tells the man not to make such a fuss and to concentrate on his driving. Then she laughs at him like he’s just said something amusing. The wife is that kind of person. The kind that laughs at you so they can get their way.

When the man and the wife get to the bistro, their friends—let’s call them Priyanka and Rajesh—are already sitting at a table. Rajesh and the man shake hands. Priyanka and the wife kiss cheeks. The bistro is fancy and new, the kind of place that the wife always picks. There are oil lanterns shaped like teardrops and floral centerpieces on the tables. Strings of dried peppers and garlic hang from the rafters. The customers are almost all foreign expats or members of Dhaka’s upper class, and a guard with a pistol stands just inside the door.

“I’m so sorry we’re late. Driving through Dhaka was awful,” said the wife. Her tone suggests somehow that it is the man’s fault they’re late.

“You poor things, you must be starving,” says Priyanka.
The four of them settle around the table. The wife and Priyanka immediately fall to gossiping about old classmates and acquaintances. They went to the same English medium high school and have been good friends ever since. Rajesh is Priyanka’s husband. The man has met Rajesh several times, but never knows what to talk about with him. Rajesh’s family is wealthy and Rajesh is gradually taking over his father’s clothing retail empire. The man is doing well for himself, but next to Rajesh he feels that his accomplishments are underwhelming. While they talk haltingly about the Bangladeshi cricket team, the man’s eyes stray occasionally to Priyanka. The man has always found Priyanka to be very attractive. Rajesh is a lucky bastard, he thinks.

They have just ordered their entrees and are working through the appetizers when a ruckus breaks out near the front door. The man thinks it’s an unhappy customer. He can see a waiter with a long purple napkin in his hands arguing with an agitated young man in jeans and a tee shirt. The young man has a silver walking cane that he waves furiously in the waiter’s face. Then the man sees four other young men walk in through the front door. They arrange themselves in a semi-circle facing into the restaurant, and the man has just enough time to realize that the black objects in their hands are pistols before they open fire.

The first shots go over people’s heads. Wooden splinters explode from the rafters. Some of the strings of garlic and dried peppers swing crazily and fell to the floor. The noise is just terrific, like a dozen metal trash can lids being slammed together. The man dives under the table and pulls his wife down with him. The wife grabs Priyanka as she falls, dragging her under by the waistline of her skirt. Later, when the man tries to recall this moment when the restaurant is being shot to pieces, he will remember the
shock of seeing Priyanka’s pale upper thighs before she can pull her skirt back over her hips.

After the shooting has stopped, a silence falls and the man pokes his head out. He sees a dishwasher has been hit in the chest and knocked to the floor, his stack of dirty dishes still miraculously in the plastic tray beside him. A Japanese woman in a booth across from them is slumped over with a vivid spray of blood down her blouse. And Rajesh has fallen backwards in his chair. At first the man thinks Rajesh is dead, there is a thick trickle of blood, but then he sees Rajesh’s eye swivel toward them. Priyanka crawls over to Rajesh and presses a napkin to his arm where a bullet has sliced clean through his upper arm. “Oh God,” says Priyanka. “Oh my God.” The man and his wife are still huddled under the table when one of the young men walks up to the dishwasher who is lying flat on the floor.

“Do you speak Bangla?” he says.

The dishwasher is covered in sweat and having a hard time breathing, but he raises his head to answer. “Yes,” the dishwasher stammers. “Ami Bangladi.” I am Bangladeshi.

The young man nods, apparently satisfied. He has a roguish haircut that is quite stylish and a clean-shaven face that seems to shine. He carries himself with an air of confidence, almost regality, as he walks past the table of Japanese business people who are frantically trying to revive the young woman that has been shot. He comes to a stop just short of Priyanka and Rajesh. The man realizes that this is the same young man he’d seen arguing with the waiter, and what he had taken for a silver walking cane is actually a sword.
The young man rests the tip of the sword between his feet and squats down.

“What are your names?” he says pleasantly.

Priyanka looks at him with a startled expression. “Priyanka. And Rajesh.”

“Thank you. Excellent. And can you recite the fatiha?”

Priyanka seems frightened. “No,” she says.

The young man turns away from her. He ducks his head and peers under the table at the man and his wife. “Hello, Uncle,” he says. “Do you know any Quran?”

“I’m sorry?” The man bumps his head on the bottom of the table, which makes him feel foolish and also irrationally peevish at his wife for clinging to his knee.

“Can you recite any surahs for us? Even just a few verses. It’s important, I’m afraid.”

The man stares dumbly. “I’m sorry?” he says again.

“What do you know the fatiha? Surely you can do at least that.”

“Yes,” says the man. “I know the fatiha.”

“Please recite it for us then.”

The man recites the seven verses of the fatiha.

“Very good.” The young man nods approvingly. “Please have Aunty recite next.”

The wife numbly recites the fatiha.

“Bravo,” says the young man. “This shouldn’t take too long. Please have a seat in the meanwhile.” He stands using the sword to support himself, and moves on to the next table, stepping over Rajesh in the process.
Although there is a lot happening in their vicinity—the young man is now interrogating a trio of college students in a booth, the dishwasher is calling out to the table of Japanese business people asking for a sip of water, Priyanka is kneeling over Rajesh, her long hair falling across his face—at this moment, the man and his wife are mostly thinking about what they should do. The young man told them to sit in their chairs. Should they sit or should they stay huddled beneath the table?

“We should make a run for it,” the man says in a low voice. He looks toward the grassy lawn through the sliding glass doors halfway across the restaurant. It is dark outside and he thinks that if they make it that far, they might be able to escape into the night.

The wife looks at him. There is an unfamiliar slackness to her face, but his suggestion seems to slowly register. Her features harden into her usual haughty confidence, and she leans toward him and whispers, “Don’t say another word or you’re going to get us both killed.”

The wife crawls out from under the table, sets both hands on the seat of her chair, and pushes herself to her feet. From his position on the floor, the man watches his wife turn her head left and right. Then, seeming to reconsider this bold attitude, she ducks down a bit, swivels her hips into her chair, and motions the man to do the same.

“Priya,” she hisses. “Priya. Come sit.” She makes urgent flapping motions below her waist and nods toward the empty chairs. Priyanka is still crouched over Rajesh, pressing the bloody cloth napkin to his arm. She looks over her shoulder at the wife and opens her mouth as if to speak but no words or sounds come out.
The man, finding courage at last, though mostly in defiance of his wife, crawls out from under the table toward Priyanka and Rajesh. “Let me,” he says. He motions Priyanka to the side and presses the napkin to Rajesh’s upper arm. “It looks like the bullet nicked an artery,” he says to Rajesh. “I’m going to apply a lot of pressure.” The man doesn’t know where these words come from. He’s not a doctor, but he’s watched a lot of television, and they seem to reassure Rajesh.

“Thank you,” Rajesh says softly. “Thank you.” His eyes stare up at the rafters.

Meanwhile the wife has gotten Priyanka into one of the other chairs. The two of them are sitting across from each other at the table, their hands flat on the white tablecloth beside the silver cutlery. Their posture is so perfect they look like models in an advertisement for a fine dining experience, except that neither of them seems to be interested in the food. The man rises to a low crouch so he can look around the restaurant while still applying pressure to Rajesh’s arm. He sees a few of the other young men circulating through restaurant. They are all in their early twenties. All clean shaven. One is wearing a polo shirt with a green alligator logo on its breast. Another is wearing a grey tee shirt that says Calvin Klein. They seem to be herding some of the diners to the front of the restaurant and others to the back. One of them moves toward the table of Japanese business people, waving his gun at them like a fly swatter. “Get up! Move, move, move.” They remain frozen until he jumps onto the booth seat and waves them towards the back of the restaurant. A woman in a beige dress suit screams as she slides around the booth over the body of the dead woman. A dignified man with grey temples crawls under the table, then dusts off his pants and joins the rest of his friends. They cluster together at the back of the restaurant.
The young man with the gun hops off the booth and turns his attention to the man and Rajesh. “What are you doing?” he says.

The man loses control of his face when he makes himself look at the young man pointing the gun at him. His mouth contorts into a smile, then a scowl, then a smile again, then a pout. His lips twist and quiver like sea slugs. “Nothing,” he says with great effort.

The young man with the gun stares at him. “Get to the back with the others,” he says.

The man grips Rajesh by his wounded arm. Priyanka gets out of her seat and takes Rajesh’s other arm around her shoulders. Rajesh groans. Together they rise unsteadily. The wife stands nearby uncertainly, making rising motions with her hands, urging them to hurry up. They are halfway to the back of the restaurant when the young man with the sword comes down the aisle with a frown on his face.

“What are you doing?”

The young man with the gun comes over. “I’m putting them with the rest,” he says.

“No. These two go to the front. The other two go to the back.”

“I don’t mind,” says the man. He has both his arms around Rajesh’s bicep. Priyanka shoots him a glance of gratitude.

The young man with the sword looks at him. He takes a few steps back and motions the man to join him. They stand apart from the rest and the young man lowers his voice to a conspiratorial hush.
“Uncle, tell me honestly. A man like you might have some acquaintances from other religions, but he can never be close to anyone who isn’t a believing Muslim. Isn’t that right?”

The man looks steadily at the young man. “Yes,” he says. “That’s right.”

“So this Hindu couple you are with. Perhaps you are fond of them, but would you say they are really close friends? A Muslim will give his life for another Muslim. It says so in the Quran. Would you give your life for them?”

The man looks over at Priyanka and Rajesh, then to his wife who is trying to say something with her eyes but he can’t quite decipher what. “No,” says the man. “I wouldn’t say we’re close friends then.”

The young man claps him on the shoulder. The man flinches.

“Go ahead, Uncle. Go take care of Aunty. She looks a little tired.”

The man walks back to them.

“What did he say?” asks the wife.

“Nothing,” says the man. “Everything is going to be fine. Come on.”

The young man with the gun takes the wife by the hand and leads her toward the front of the restaurant. The man almost trips over his feet. He turns towards Priyanka and Rajesh but he can’t look them in the eyes. “Everything is going to be fine,” he says again, then follows after his wife.

Raihan is sitting cross legged at the edge of the dock. His hands are in his lap. His eyes tunnel into the water, to the dark stones below. “Fifteen minutes later, the police arrived. The five young men held everyone in the restaurant hostage for hours.
Two of them were shot during a gun battle with the police. Toward the end of the night, they released their Muslim hostages but kept all the rest. The Japanese business people, the three college students from America, even Hindu Bangladeshis like Priyanka and Rajesh. The man and his wife never saw what happened to their friends. They were on the other side of the police line by then. But a few days later, they saw the videos that people had taken from the surrounding apartment buildings that had a line of sight into the restaurant. They saw grainy images of a young man with a sword calmly hacking blurry hostages to death just before the final raid. That was the closest they ever got to seeing what happened in the restaurant.”

The night has somehow gotten darker since Raihan began talking. Morris is still sitting in his folding chair, his motionless body like a boulder. Without turning his head away from the lake, he says, “Tell me the truth, Raihan. Was that you in the story?”

“You tell me first.”

But Morris doesn’t seem to hear him. He just says again: “Was it you? Was it really you?”

Raihan’s mouth curls into a snarl. “It was a friend of mine.”

The timer on Raihan’s watch begins to beep. He reaches up and releases the cable clicker. The camera shutter snaps shut and thirty minutes of accumulated light is rendered into a tableau of star trails spinning over blue mountain ranges and a silver flat lake that doesn’t quite reflect the sky. In that moment, their faces are illuminated clearly by the light from the camera screen. But neither looks at the other, and soon the darkness hides them.
Jenny wants a lot of things. She wants her wildberry body wash and the loofah from her apartment. She wants her Quran from the backseat of her pickup truck. She wants her hair to stop falling out in clumps. She wants her goddamn shoes back.

Instead she is trapped at the Somerford Institute for the Treatment of Eating Disorders. Every day at 6:15pm, the kitchen staff rolls out the patients’ individualized meals on a sturdy plastic cart. Some of the patients feign enthusiasm as they tear the saran wrapping off their plates. Many avert their eyes. Over the past week, Jenny has worked her way up to a few spoonfuls of spaghetti, a large quivering cube of jello, and two protein shakes, which they force down her throat.

“I told you, I don’t want these. I want chocolate Danishes. Why does it matter what I eat as long as I eat?”

Today Jenny has fixated on Danishes. She imagines that if puff pastries drizzled in chocolate appeared on her plate, at that same instant all her problems would disappear. As usual, nobody listens to her. Most of the other patients are doing better than her. Some have come here voluntarily. The staff tells her she has to finish her protein shake or she won’t get her cube of jello tomorrow. Jenny sips her shake and argues. She sips her shake and glares.
At night the phlebotomist sneaks into Jenny’s room to take her blood. Sometimes she sits up and screams at him. But the drugs make her sleep like the dead. Most nights she does not wake up, or she sees the dark figure and the needle like a distant nightmare through a fog. “What kind of place is this?” Jenny yells at staff members in the hall. “Why are you torturing me?” They give her reasonable explanations—chemical compounds and blood cell counts that are only accurate at night. But Jenny is not feeling reasonable. Everywhere she goes, people are watching her. An attendant watches her in the shower while she scrubs herself with a tiny bar of soap. An attendant watches her while she goes to the bathroom to make sure she doesn’t throw up or kill herself. Jenny would find this more humiliating if it weren’t only pee. She isn’t eating enough to do much more than pee.

“Sometimes I pee blood, you know,” she says to the fat faced attendant watching her through the open door.

When the attendant does not respond, Jenny looks her straight in the eye, grabs a handful of toilet paper, and vigorously wipes herself. She stands, exposing a triangle of pubic stubble and two emaciated thighs. The attendant steps around her and checks the toilet bowl.

* * *

Jenny doesn’t remember the hospital. Not really, anyway. She remembers that they took her shoes away. She remembers that Ibrahim was there. And Diana maybe. She remembers the roller bed and the empty room, the scuff marks on the walls, the ER nurses who made her eat saltine crackers when all she wanted to eat was water. But details like these are a scattered archipelago in an ocean of unmemory.
She remembers getting her shoes back on the day the hospital sent her to Somerford. They were just dirty old tennis shoes with three pink stripes on the outer sides, but for the entire ride a little bird in Jenny’s chest soared at the sight of them.

“Look.” She pointed at her bouncing shoes and nudged the tall man in scrubs sitting next to her in the transport. “My feet are happy.”

The tall man was doing a crossword puzzle. He lifted his pencil and scratched in a guess for sixteen across. When Jenny got to Somerford, they took her shoes away again. Because of the shoelaces, they said. Strangle threat.

Jenny started hyperventilating. “But I’m not suicidal. I’m not. You don’t believe me. But I’m not. I’m telling you I’m not.”

The intake nurse at the reception counter told Jenny she would get them back eventually and gave her a sympathetic smile. Jenny has learned not to trust people with sympathetic smiles.

* * *

Diana and Ibrahim are the leaders of a weekly discussion group for Muslim converts that Jenny used to attend in DC. She considers them her friends, but she also keeps expecting them to abandon her because she, Jenny, is worthless. Once a week, they come to see her in the mahogany paneled visitors room. Jenny stares at the floor while giving them the run down of what’s been taken from her. Her phone (internet). Her earbud headphones (strangle threat). Her hijab safety pins (self harm device). Her spiral notebooks (wire spines, self harm device). Her hummingbird earrings. Her shoes. Her knee high socks. Her scarf. Her purse. Her drawstring pajama pants. Her whole fucking life.
“How about Jenga? Wouldn’t it be fun to play Jenga again? Or maybe a card game?” Diana tries to find ways to divert her.

Jenny tells them that she can’t concentrate enough to play cards. She tells them she came so close to starving to death that her body started to eat its own organs. She uses the phrase ‘impaired cognitive functioning’. She wants them to feel bad for her, but then she senses that maybe she has gone too far, maybe they will abandon her.

“But I haven’t told you the good news,” Jenny says. “I’ve decided…” She pauses dramatically. “I’ve decided that I’m gonna be out of here by Christmas.”

Diana goes to the board games shelf and comes back. They all watch Diana set up the Jenga tower.

“Everyone in DC is making dua for you,” says Ibrahim after a while. “Have you talked to your dad recently? How’s your eating?” Ibrahim asks uncomfortable questions.

“It’s fine,” says Jenny. She looks down and her right hand is scratching a long angry red patch on her… on her… what’s the word? Forearm? She drops her hands beneath the table. She laughs. Ibrahim and Diana do not laugh. “Yep. Doing fine,” says Jenny. “How are you?”

*   *   *

At first nobody at Somerford believes her when she says that she is Muslim. They see her visitors—Diana who is white, Ibrahim who is white—and they assume she is just another white girl. Jenny determines to prove them wrong.

“Hey. Get up. No sleeping here.”

Jenny is prostrating toward Mecca in the elbow of a hallway. She has draped a T-shirt over her head to cover her hair. The T-shirt is blue and says Rock ‘N’ Roll
Marathon DC 2015. Other patients, all shoeless, step around her on their way to the TV room or the art therapy room or the computer room with the internet that is off limits to her. When she is done praying, Jenny looks up at the ponytail attendant standing over her.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” she says defiantly. “I was praying to God. You know. GOD. Allah.”

The attendant shrugs and walks away. Jenny resumes her prayers.

* * *

Jenny’s father is a cop in West Virginia. Every six days, he swaps shifts with a buddy so he can drive four hundred miles to visit her. Jenny greets him with a sad smile or a closed stony face, depending on her mood. Either way she always says, “Hi, Daddy,” when he walks into the room.

Jenny and her father sit at the mahogany table. He is trying to tell jokes, to make light of everything and anything. Jenny is laughing, and her father is feeling good. Then she isn’t, and he isn’t either. She turns sideways in her chair, the lines of her mouth puckered and hard.

Her father leans back, rebuffed by this sudden silence.

“You know, when these shrinks told me you’ve got some mental problem, I said they had to be talking about someone else. Not my daughter, I said. Didn’t I raise you to be strong? It’s your mother’s side that’s got all the crazy in it. All this business with Moslems and Islam and starving yourself to death. It’s her bad blood. Not mine. Hey.” He grabs her wrist and turns her toward him. “You look at me when I’m talking.”
Jenny does not cry out. She tries to jerk her wrist away but he holds it tight. He lowers his voice to a hush.

“As soon as these people release you, you’re coming back home where I can take care of you proper. You were fine before you started pretending to be Moslem, and you’ll be fine again as soon as you realize what the real problem is. And I promise you, Jen, it isn’t me. See? I’m the one telling you to get better.”

Jenny always wishes she could cry after her father leaves. It feels like she should, like a viscous pocket of bile is trying to rise past a tight place in her throat and come out as a scream. She sits on a stool in a corner of the art therapy room while the other patients are at their easels, fingerpainting in white angelic smocks. She can almost put her finger on this thing inside of her, a cockroach scurrying on the edges of impaired cognitive functioning. But then the feeling disappears.

* * *

Jenny’s therapist is named Consuelo. She is a small forceful woman who talks in emphatic tones about weight goals and trauma. She wears big necklaces. Jenny believes that Consuelo can get her out of here.

“And that’s why I was so hungry,” Jenny is saying. “My dad cut me off financially, so I just ran out of money for food.”

They are sitting on opposite sides of the table in an old conference room.

“Ohay. Tell me more.” Consuelo is taking notes on her iPad with a stylus. This secretly pisses Jenny off—she wants to know what the fuck Consuelo is writing about her.
“What do you mean, tell you more? That’s it. I know you don’t believe me, but it’s as simple as that.”

Consuelo tilts her face upward, pushing a hard smile in Jenny’s direction. “You don’t trust me, do you, Jennifer?”

Jenny laughs nervously. “Jennifer? Nobody calls me Jennifer.” When Consuelo does not respond to this, Jenny shrugs. She’s staring at the pistachio green carpeting. “I mean, I don’t distrust you. I just don’t see the point of this. What good is talking going to do?”

“Maybe it can help you process things, maybe even heal.” Consuelo’s voice is calm.

“That sounds ridiculous.” Jenny’s eyes dart to Consuelo, then back to the floor. “No offense. But I have more important things to worry about.”

“Like what?”

Jenny perks up. She senses an opportunity to assert a better and older version of herself, someone capable, plucky, definitely not insane. “Well, for starters, do you know how much my insurance charges me for being here? Forty dollars! Forty dollars a day! I need to get out of here, finish my masters, and get myself a J-O-B.”

“Do you know what day it is today, Jennifer?”

“What do you mean?”

“What’s the date? Or the day of the week?”

Jenny’s face goes blank. For a second she isn’t seeing or hearing anything. “That’s a trick question,” she says angrily. “You’re trying to make me seem crazy.”

“It’s Tuesday, December 15th.”
Jenny realizes suddenly that there are flecks of blood under her fingernails. Her right hand has been scratching her left forearm raw this entire time. Jenny forces her hands to be still. Consuelo is looking at her.

“The soap here makes me break out in rashes.” Jenny holds up her arms.

“I’m going to recommend you for some tests in our neurological wing.”

Jenny’s knee starts to bounce up and down, her heel starts to tap tap tap while Consuelo writes on her iPad with her stylus. “This is bullshit.” Jenny has catapulted to her feet without being fully aware. Her palms are flat on the conference table and she is towering over Consuelo. Jenny is surprisingly tall. “Just let me go. Let me go, I swear. I am going to get my life back to normal and I will be fine. Everything will be fine if you just fucking let me go.”

Consuelo remains seated. “You would not be fine,” she says. “In fact, you’re lucky you didn’t die. You weighed a hundred and three pounds when you got here, which for someone of your height and build is dangerously low.” Consuelo taps something on her iPad. “Your blood chemistry still shows strong anemia, acidosis, hypoglycemia. You’ve lost bone density from mineral deficiency, which means you risk developing osteoporosis even though you’re only twenty-five. When was the last time you had your period? Six months ago? A year? Do you need me to go on?”

And Jenny’s heartbeat, for reasons that she does not understand, starts to bang behind her ears—all that blood marching through her head like a thundering parade.

*   *   *

When Jenny first had an inkling that her life might fall apart, she went to see the Imam. The Imam was a local celebrity in the DC Muslim community and always very
busy. Diana and Ibrahim had to arrange for Jenny to meet him before a talk he was set to
give. The Imam was shorter than she had imagined. He had a narrow face and a mild
voice that, Jenny felt, suggested wisdom and gentleness. He sat on the floor of the
exercise room at the Muslim community center and motioned for her to sit on a yoga
block.

“What can I do for you, sister?”

Jenny only had twenty minutes, so she just told him everything. She had
converted seven months ago and, alhamdulillah, she was grateful for the serenity of five
daily prayers and the company of good Muslim friends. She was proud to be part of
something beautiful. But her ex-boyfriend hated Islam and had kicked her out of their
apartment, her father hated Islam and had cut her off financially, she had moved all her
things, smuggled her cat into a new building that didn’t allow pets, paid the security
deposit with the last of her savings, wasn’t able to pay rent, had gone hungry for several
months, couldn’t concentrate, was failing graduate school, had fallen asleep at her
internship.

“And I can’t eat,” Jenny said, near tears. “Ibrahim and Diana took me grocery
shopping last week when they found out what was happening. I have this freezer full of
food now and for some reason I can’t eat any of it.”

Jenny continued talking, and as she talked, the Imam’s eyes began to avoid her, as
if there were something very interesting ten feet to the left of Jenny’s face. He smiled at
this interesting thing while she spoke. He nodded at it. He nodded and wiped his sweaty
lip.

* * *

34
Here is a riddle. What is thin and white and hidden in plain sight? What is long and leather and light as a feather?

Jenny has been at Somerford almost two weeks when she realizes that she’s pulled a fast one. Consuelo, the attendants, the nurses, her doctor, her psychiatrist—she’s fooled them all. She chortles. She gloats. Jenny has a secret.

On the day of her appointment in the neurological unit, she has to pass through security to get to the other wing. The security guards check her pockets. They check her mouth. They pat lightly between her breasts. They even shine a flashlight up her nose in case something other than boogers is hiding there. Jenny smiles at them. Her nostrils glow.

Inside, the neurological unit is identical to the eating disorders unit. Soft brown corduroy wallpapering. Bright rectangular lights. They lead her down a side hallway to a bare windowless room where a man with a moustache and goatee waits for her behind a folding table. He asks her to respond to several hypothetical scenarios, which Jenny quite enjoys. He asks some direct questions about her current state of mind, which Jenny does not enjoy. He then asks Jenny to play checkers with him.

“Seriously? Cause I’m pretty good at checkers. Just saying. You’re gonna get whupped.”

Jenny struggles to beat the man with the moustache and goatee. Her usual strategy involves baiting opponents into unfavorable trade offs, but this requires her to think two or three moves ahead. She switches to a strategy of attrition and tries to whittle him down. She enjoys this board game dance, the satisfying clack of the checkers when she makes a king. In the end she wins, just like she said she would.
“Good job,” says the man. He stands and leans across the table for a
sportsmanlike handshake.

Once her appointment is done, Jenny waits in the lobby of the neurological unit.

Eventually the ponytail attendant comes to escort her back. He holds the door for her
without a word, then walks behind her down the hallway lined with fake ferns in cheap
plastic vases. At the entrance to the eating disorders unit, the security guard gives her a
quick pat down.

“What’s this?” He lifts the hem of her T-shirt and fingers the thin white leather
belt holding up her jeans. “You can’t have this.”

“Why not? I had it on when I left.”

“Nope. Can’t let you back in with this.”

Jenny cackles. “That’s okay. I don’t wanna go back.” She turns to the ponytail

As a joke, Jenny pretends to slink away like a cartoon burglar doing the sneaky
walk. She keeps going until she has reached the heavy glass door that leads outside. The
security guard and ponytail attendant watch her impassively. She pauses. She can see an
asphalt driveway through the door and a pile of autumn leaves on the lawn. Jenny tries to
imagine herself walking through the door, but her imagination refuses to comply. It
looks cold outside and she doesn’t have her shoes.

Jenny turns to the security guard and the ponytail attendant. “I’m not giving you
my goddamn belt,” she says.

In the end, they call three other attendants and two security guards to hold her
down. Jenny kicks one of them in the shins. She tries to slap one across the face. They
drag her to the floor. She starts dry heaving. Her upper body spasms from vomit reflex but nothing comes up. “You fuckers!” She gags. The ponytail attendant grabs her by the belt buckle. She feels the belt whip out through the belt loops. She bites the shoulder of a small attendant who is holding down her right arm. He cries out in surprise. Her arm free now, Jenny grabs at the loose end of the belt and tries to pull it from the ponytail attendant who holds it fast, who stands above her tall and strong. She wraps the belt thrice around her hand and hangs from it as if she were a mountaineer holding fast to a lifeline on a precipice.

“You can’t do this! It’s so unfair. Please please please. Just let me keep it.” The attendants and security guards pull her back to the floor. The belt slips her grip. Someone goes to get a straitjacket. Jenny continues dry heaving. A part of her wants to throw up. She wants to spew chunks all over these despicable people, but nothing comes.

Later that day, Jenny is sitting cross-legged on the couch in the TV room. The movie Love Actually is playing. Bruises spread their blue and purple petals under her skin on her upper arms, her legs, her neck. Jenny avoids making eye contact with the other patients sitting around the room. Some of them converse softly with each other and she imagines they are talking about her. The chubby face attendant comes into the room to tell her that she has a call from a friend. Jenny follows her to the bank of landline phones.

“Hey. How’re you doing?” It’s Diana.

“Okay,” says Jenny.

“Uh oh. What’s wrong?” Diana’s tone is light and bantering. Jenny thinks that Diana doesn’t really want to know what’s wrong.
“Nothing.” She sighs. She breathes lightly into the phone, she realizes she’s breathing into the phone, she tries to stop breathing into the phone, she realizes she’s stopped breathing. She breathes. Diana is still waiting.

“They took my belt away today,” Jenny says at last. “I fought them for it so they put me in a straitjacket for an hour.”

“Oh.” Diana pauses. “Well. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright. There were a dozen people holding me down. I fought them like crazy.” She laughs softly, sadly, but with pride as well. “I bet you’ve never been in a fight, huh, Diana? I’ve been in a bunch, and I always fight dirty.”

“You know,” Diana says with affection, “I think I knew that about you already.”

*  *  *

The next morning before breakfast, Jenny stands in line with everyone for the weighing room. She is sandwiched between a bulimic teenage boy with rotting teeth and a former beauty pageant queen that she recognizes from group therapy.

“What are you in for?” the teenage boy jokes with them. “Aggravated assault? Grand theft auto?” Jenny tries to smile for the boy and his jokes.

Inside the weighing room Jenny strips to her underwear. A nurse with an iPad gestures her onto the old-fashioned scale. She shivers while the nurse pushes the metal sliders left and right until the scale head balances. Jenny’s weight today is one hundred twelve and a half pounds. When her weight reaches one hundred and twenty-seven, she will be released.
For breakfast, Jenny makes herself eat a second pudding cup. At lunch, she succumbs to the second helping of chicken breast. Jenny used to be a vegetarian before she came to Somerford. Not anymore.

During free time, Jenny works on the adult coloring book that Diana’s husband, Owais, has sent her. She pencils swirls in periwinkle. She pencils leaves in mauve. She absently runs a hand through her thinning hair. At dinnertime, she refuses to eat the meatloaf.

“I ate too much today. I’m going to throw up,” she says.

They have told her that her stomach is a tight little rubber balloon. Slow to expand after so many months of disuse. But Jenny attributes her nausea to something else. She feels filthy somehow. Tainted by all this food. One attendant tries to sweet talk her into finishing it. Another threatens her with protein shakes. A member of the kitchen staff comes through collecting dirty dishes on his cart.

“Uh uh,” he wags a finger at her. “You’re not getting up till you finish that.”

Jenny sits alone with the meatloaf in front of her. Just looking at it makes her want to puke. Instead, she sings a song. “Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer, you take one down, astaghfir Allah, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall.”

Jenny wants one of the passing attendants to ask her what astaghfir Allah means, but nobody does. Eventually they throw the meatloaf away. Jenny takes her pills and goes to her room. Free time is nearly over, anyway. She lies down on her bed and opens the copy of the Quran that Ibrahim brought for her. The lettering on the cover is embossed gold. The words inside are in Arabic and English. Each evening she tries the
English to see if her ability to read has come back. Her eyes gloss over the letters, the meanings float away. But every day, she gets a little closer. Jenny is learning to be patient. She sets the Quran back on the floor, and closes her eyes with the door open and the lights still on.

*    *    *

Good behavior eventually earns Jenny computer privileges at Somerford. “Just be mindful,” says Consuelo. “Eating disorders are often rooted in body image issues, which can be exacerbated by the internet.” She sounds like a boring schoolteacher who doesn’t know what the internet is. Jenny tells Consuelo for the millionth time that she doesn’t have body image issues, but this time she doesn’t care. She is looking forward to the internet.

The first thing she does is log onto Facebook. Her newsfeed is dominated by her Muslim friends, and this is what she sees. Death in Syria, famine in Yemen, oppression in Palestine, the hand of American foreign policy. A girl in New York harassed for wearing hijab. A man in Texas shot outside a mosque. She sees Ibrahim and even Diana have posted things. Her friends’ comments are outraged, sarcastic, pleading, sardonic, infectious. Jenny sees an article about a prominent politician who is calling for Muslims to be expelled if they believe in the shariah. She reposts it with the comment: Shame on you, America. She feels very brave. She feels very Muslim.

She is responding to an e-mail from her ex-landlord about the last month’s rent when the Facebook notifications start coming in. Four people have liked her post. Diana and Ibrahim; a girl that Jenny met at a Quran study group; a guy that she met at a singles mixer. Jenny goes back to her e-mail, but then the comments start.
Her Uncle Jimmy: Come back to Christ, Jen. Islam is an ideology of hate.

Ibrahim: Respectfully, sir, you couldn’t be more wrong. Islam literally means peace.

Her father: Shame on America? Shame on you. I want my daughter back from before she was brainwashed.

Several of her other Muslim friends start chiming in. The argument unfolds like a mob fight in slow motion. Jenny gets up from her seat, sees the clock on the wall. Somehow thirty minutes have passed. She leaves the computer room and walks past the TV to the social phones. The phones are all occupied. People are talking to their parents, boyfriends, girlfriends. She goes to reception and asks the nurse behind the desk if she can use the phone. It’s a family emergency, she says, and dials her father’s number from memory.

“This is Jeff.”

“I will never come back home. You’re the reason I got kicked out of grad school, my internship, my apartment. It’s your fault! You knew I was hungry after you cut me off. Why can’t you just admit that you wanted me to starve to death?”

Her father’s voice comes back at her quick. “My fault? I did what was best for you. I have always—”

Jenny slams the phone onto the receiver. She slams it down again and again until the nurse grabs her hand and forces it to stop. Jenny stares at the black oblong of the phone nestled in its receiver. She feels the nurse’s cold hand over hers. At this moment, Jenny has an unexpected thought. She wonders if her father will take her off his health insurance now. She does not think about this in practical or financial terms. She
experiences it as a raw and sudden vulnerability, as if some invisible person were about to strike her. She stands there looking blankly into the nurse’s bewildered face. She trembles beneath her icy touch.

* * *

Life at Somerford is designed to make Jenny gain weight despite herself. A nutritionist plans her meals. The attendants prohibit exercise. Drinking is limited so she can’t fill her stomach with water. The antidepressants and antipsychotics cause weight gain as a side effect. During one of their sessions, Consuelo congratulates her. Jenny’s latest measurements have put her outside the range for immediate physical danger.

“Thanks, I guess,” she says.

But even Jenny notices that her days have become clearer. She no longer has to ask if it is Tuesday or Wednesday. She knows exactly when the weekend will come, what days Consuelo has off, which days Diana and Ibrahim will visit. She plays card games with them now. Uno, Go Fish, Thirteen, Spades. She has learned the ponytail attendant’s name (Vinny), the fat face attendant’s name (Francine), and the sassy kitchen staff guy who pushes the plastic cart (Bernal). She even learns the name of the phlebotomist (Harry), but she refuses to speak to him whenever she wakes up and finds his small sweaty face hovering over hers.

“I don’t care who he is,” she says to Vinny a.k.a. Ponytail. “His job is messed up. He should apologize.” Vinny doesn’t say anything, but Jenny imagines he agrees.

Clarity also brings new discomforts. With December nearly over, she is forced to accept that she will not be out of here by Christmas. When Diana comes with her husband Owais, or Ibrahim comes with his wife, Jenny experiences paralyzing envy for
these happy couples and their ordinary lives. Somerford’s social worker starts coming to her with questions about her father’s insurance policy, which make her nauseous with anxiety. She senses for the first time that something monstrous lurks beneath the chemical haze of her medication.

As if that were not enough, her body hair starts to grow rapidly and of course she does not have a razor. She hides her arms and legs when people come to visit so they can’t see her furry skin.

“Why is this happening?” she complains. “I’m like the abominable snowman.”

“Being too thin makes you lose body heat faster. This is your body’s natural way of compensating.” Consuelo looks at her, waits for her to raise her eyes. “It’s a good thing, Jennifer. It means your body finally has enough energy to protect itself.”

Despite this, the hair on her head continues to fall out. During one of her father’s visits, she begins to pull out fistfuls of hair and fling them at his feet.

“See what you did to me,” she says. “See what’s happening to my life.”

Her father stands heavily and walks out of the room. He drives back to West Virginia. But six days later he is back again, trying to make her laugh at his bad jokes, giving her news of her two step brothers in grade school, her younger brother perpetually at community college. Whenever she doesn’t talk, he sits there stoically. He seems different in these moments, more humbled and patient than usual. Jenny thinks about how he used to take them down to the park on Saturdays and encourage them to do back flips off the jungle gym. She thinks about how, in his own way, he used to love her, how he did his best to raise her and her brother after their mother left.

Then a thought occurs to her.
“Maybe I’m just crazy. Crazy kinda runs in the family.”

It is 2pm on a Thursday. She is meeting Consuelo one last time before Consuelo takes off for the holidays.

“Jenny. Think about it this way. If someone comes to a doctor with a broken arm, the doctor sets the bone and puts their arm in a cast. If someone has malaria, they give them malaria pills. You have a disease that needs treatment just like anything else.”

“Okay. So what do I have? Is it a broken arm or is it malaria?”

Consuelo looks at her. “You have anorexia nervosa, mild PTSD, and possibly borderline personality disorder.”

Jenny tilts in her chair and laughs. “Aren’t those just fancy words for crazy?”

*   *   *

Christmas comes. Somerford does not put up holiday decorations, so the nurse at the front desk plays Christmas songs from her computer. Diana comes to visit on Christmas morning with her husband Owais in tow. For twenty unexpected minutes, their visit overlaps with Jenny’s family’s.

“You must be Mr. Harving.” Owais stands as her father walks into the room.

Jenny’s father extends his hand and gives Owais the look over. He smiles though, when he sees Diana.

“Jen’s told me all about you,” he says, once they’ve been introduced.

Jenny laughs nervously. “Not really, Daddy.”

“Well, you’re a good friend. I know that much.”

He introduces the rest of the Harving family members. Jenny’s cousin Jerome, her Uncle Jimmy and Aunty Ann. Owais has a gift for the gab and soon gets the men
talking about football and the Steeler’s shot at the playoffs this year. Aunty Ann sits next to Jenny and begins to describe all the food she has prepared for the Harving Christmas dinner, and, oh, won’t it be nice once Jenny is finally able to eat it all as well. Jenny is trying to smile at her aunt, whom she hates, and Diana is trying to deflect things by asking for her recipes, when Jenny’s father roars and slaps Owais hard on the back. Jenny’s legs jerk under the table, telling her to run away, but it’s only some sort of football joke that Owais has made. Her father is laughing. Uncle Jimmy is smiling.

Owais pretends to stagger forward. “Whoa. That’s quite a wallop you’ve got there, Mr. Harving.”

“Call me, Jeff. Unless you see me on the street. Then it’s Officer.” He winks.

Diana and Owais shake everyone’s hands before they leave. Diana hugs Jenny last. “Good luck,” she whispers.

The Harving family settles around the mahogany table, alone and quieter now. Jerome, who is seventeen, sits at the far end and takes out his phone. Jenny has the urge to tell him that using his phone is against the rules.

“Well, weren’t those two lovely,” says Aunty Ann.


“He’s a VA doctor, Daddy.” Jenny is trying very hard not to scratch the skin off her arms.

“What I don’t get,” says Jerome from the end of the table, “is how a woman like that ended up with some ugly Pakistani dude.”

“Jerome!”
He looks up at his mother. “What? Not being racist. Just saying, she’s hot, he’s not. Am I wrong?” Jerome goes back to his phone. “But, yeah, he’s probably Muslim.” Unlike the rest of their family, Jerome knows how to pronounce Muslim right.

“They both are.”

Everyone turns to Jenny.

“Excuse me?”

“Diana is Muslim, Uncle Jimmy. They both are.” Jenny has practiced looking people in the face for the past two weeks, but she’s staring at the floor again.

Aunty Ann laughs nervously. “That young woman? She’s practically a girl.”

“Diana is a lawyer,” Jenny says evenly. “And she’s Muslim because she says she’s Muslim.”

Jenny’s father swats the air with the back of his hand. “Guess everyone’s turning Moslem these days.”

“You shouldn’t joke about it, Jeff.” Uncle Jimmy turns to her. “Honey, you know I love you, but this business with Islam has got to stop. You cannot be saved if—”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Jimmy.” Jenny’s father has crossed one leg over the other and is looking at his watch. He seems to have come to a decision. “We’ve only got an hour here and you’re boring everyone to death with this religious Christian crap.”


Jenny’s father smiles coldly. “No offense, but shove it, Ann. Nobody tells my daughter what to do but me.”

Without anyone noticing, Jerome turns his phone so he can take a picture of the look on his mother’s face. Then he catches Jenny’s eye and grins.
Jenny learns on a Saturday that she’s to be released the following Tuesday. Through some mysterious calculus of their own, her insurance company has decided that she no longer requires treatment. The Somerford doctors nonetheless insist that she pass a final test as part of their protocol. The test entails going out with a friend, eating a predetermined meal, and doing a predetermined activity. For her meal, she chooses a cheeseburger and fries at Shake Shack, a chocolate glazed donut for dessert. For her activity, she chooses a walk around the Inner Harbor in downtown Baltimore.

“I could take off early if you need,” says Ibrahim over the phone. “No big deal really. Diana would do it but she’s slammed at work this week.”

“Thanks,” says Jenny. “But I’ve got this. I’ll see you guys soon inshaallah.”

At 4pm sharp, her father pulls into the asphalt driveway. He is driving her pickup truck. Jenny walks through the door in her winter coat, purple hat, and pink striped running shoes—recently released from storage. She taps her feet on the ground and breathes the cold air. She smells the rot and must of leaves on the ground. It is her first time outside in seven weeks. She feels invincible.

Her father rolls the window down. “Get in the truck, numb nuts. It’s freezing.”

They drive surface streets to downtown, her father behind the wheel, Jenny on her father’s phone. The phone emits little beeps and a slow carnival tune.

“Candy Crush? Good to know you’ve got your priorities straight.”

She grins. “You’re just mad I’m gonna beat your high score.”

But Candy Crush proves to be exhausting. Jenny sets the phone down and watches the world passing through her window. The world seems more excessive than it
was before. The signal lights are brighter, the rush of the wind is louder. Her father 
lights a cigarette and Jenny can taste the smoke of it on her tongue. She watches a little 
boy with a green plastic backpack crossing the street in front of them. 

The glass walls and aluminum siding inside the Shake Shack give off a dull glow. 

Her father orders cheeseburgers and fries for both of them, a milkshake for himself. 
Jenny waits at the table as he walks over with the tray. She tears the paper sleeve off the 
burger and makes herself take the first bite. It doesn’t taste like anything. Her father 
reaches inside his pants pocket for a pencil and the piece of paper where he is supposed 
to record their outing. He looks over the form, scratches the side of his jaw. 

“Paperwork. There’s always the goddamn paperwork.” He looks at her, pencil 
poised. “So, if I ask you how your food tastes, is that going to make you go nuts all over 
again?” 

Jenny sets her burger down with both hands. “No,” she says firmly. “I will not 
go nuts. And it tastes good. Thank you.” 

Her father shrugs and starts to write. 

She finishes the cheeseburger. It’s the French fries that nearly beat her. They 
have given her too many French fries in this gingham paper basket. Jenny counts thirty-
four in total. Thirty-four fries. It takes her half an hour. When she’s done her father 
goes out to the truck and comes back with a greasy pink box. 

“From Ricardo’s, as requested.” He sets the chocolate glazed donut on her tray. 

Jenny pinches the donut between two fingers and places it back into the box. 

“Maybe later,” she says.
Her father frowns and bends over her. “Are you quitting, Jenny Harving? You know I won’t have a quitter in this family.”

“Hey, okay okay.” Jenny scoots her chair away from her father. “Just a little later. After the walk, okay?” As she says this, Jenny feels that she has become another person, a fake-Jenny who is much calmer than real-Jenny ever was.

They start their walk in the warren of little shops across from the aquarium. Despite the cold, families and young people are out in large numbers. A little girl in a white down jacket runs down the row of shops. A woman with a mylar balloon trailing from one hand chases after her. The balloon says HAPPY BIRTHDAY in thirteen different colors, one for every letter. Outside one shop, a manic man with a paunch and a heavy accent is trying to sell custom lighters. “See?” he says. “See? See?” He flicks a lighter on and off, spins it in his palm, rolls it over his knuckles with the flame locked on. Jenny finds herself imagining how nice it might feel to take the man’s lighter and burn herself, to let the flame wipe away this ugly red patch on her arm. “I need to sit,” she says to her father. “My feet hurt.” She hobbles over to a concrete bench.

Her father sits beside her and lights a cigarette. A man in a security uniform comes over and tells him not to smoke.

“Goddamn communist rules,” says her father, after the man has left. He flicks the cigarette into the bush. “You ready to keep walking?”

Jenny doesn’t answer. They are sitting between the old museum ship and the shopping mall where the pedestrian traffic is thickest. People come so close that she can smell them. She can lift her hand and touch them. A man and woman in their fifties go by, they’re talking about rotating the tires on their car. A punk girl with purple hair stalks
by, she reeks of alcohol. The cold from the bench is seeping into her flesh, and any
minute now her father will order her up, but Jenny is trying to understand this frantic
pumping in her chest, the dizzy lightness in her head. She wants to believe it’s because
she’s seeing something beautiful in all these people here. But then she looks again at this
reeling mess of humanity, and all she sees is that she is terrified.

* * *

Several months before Jenny converted, she decided to practice praying to see if
she would like it. She had just moved to DC to start her masters in international affairs
and was living with her boyfriend in a damp English basement on 16th Street. She had
some Muslim friends, but none in DC, so she looked up an online tutorial. Early one
morning, she stood in front of the cheap floor mirror in the kitchen area and practiced
emulating the man in the video, bowing and prostrating on the white tile floor, parroting
the Arabic words of the fatiha. She didn’t have a prayer rug, so she used a freshly
laundered pillowcase. She wasn’t sure if she had to cover her hair, so she didn’t. Her
boyfriend, who had moved to DC to be with her, was out at his part-time job at the coffee
shop. He was moody and played a lot of video games. Once at a restaurant, he left in the
middle of dinner without saying a word and walked all the way back home. Whenever
her boyfriend became so furious that he punched the apartment walls, Jenny took their
cat, Mr. Squeegee, to play in Logan Circle. She meowed and purred at the cat. She
imagined that she was telling him about her day while he darted and pounced around the
willow oak trees.

For a long time, Jenny kept her prayers secret. She prayed in stairwells, changing
rooms, abandoned corners in the college library. She found that she could set an alarm
for the predawn prayer without waking up her boyfriend. In the darkness, she padded into the kitchen, took down the pillowcase from its place on the shelf, and prayed while the outside world still slept. When she finished, instead of going back to bed, she put on her shoes and stepped out onto the empty street. Many years later, she remembers these moments. Like a weary traveler, she looks back the way she’s come—through a marriage, a divorce, countless emergency rooms, treatment centers, therapists, three suicide attempts that she was lucky to survive. She stands again on that empty street in the wide open air, the dawn just beginning to show beyond the brick teeth tops of row houses, and she marvels at that young woman’s growing elation, her faith in the possibilities of becoming someone new.

**Brother Musa**

Most of the house was still asleep, and Henry was in the upstairs bathroom trying to unclog the toilet when Qasim came to ask for a favor.

“Hey, bro, I… oh.”

“Salaams, Qasim. What’s up?” Henry was crouched over the toilet bowl, making little splashy noises with the plunger in a thin brown gruel.

“Wa alaikum salaams.” Qasim laughed. “Did you do that?”

“Pretty sure someone else clogged it up earlier. I mean, yeah, I used it just now… so I guess my guys are somewhere in there too. But it’s probably not their fault. Cause… my poops are small, is what I’m trying to say.”
Qasim gravely scratched his salt and pepper beard from just beyond the bathroom door. “Uh huh. Uh huh.”

Henry straightened up and let the plunger handle rest against the lip of the bowl. “So, you ready to go?”

“Actually, bro. I almost forgot something, and it kinda has to do with you. Are you ready?” Qasim held up the blade of his hand and flashed it down. “You’re in charge while I’m gone.”

“What? Why am I in charge?”

“Because you’re Mama Hen Henry.”

Henry wiped sweat off his brow—with his upper arm instead of his hands. “Can I tell you something, Q?”

“Sure, bro.”

“I hate that nickname. Mama Hen. Why am I Mama Hen?”

Qasim jut his chin out at Henry. “I’ll tell you why. Cause it’s 10am and all these other knuckleheads are asleep while you’re in here unclogging a toilet. That’s why. And that’s why you’re in charge for the next five weeks. Got it?”

Henry started plunging again. “Yeah, I got it. But, Q. You’re going to owe me, man. Dealing with all these problem children isn’t easy.”


“And what’s that exactly?”

Qasim was already walking down the hallway, his voice receding but clear. “Tough love, baby bro. Sometimes these guys need a little tough loving.”
Henry wasn’t worried about most of the guys in the house. He had been living there for ten months, and he knew what to expect from them. The problem he had was Musa. Musa had just moved into the house three days ago, and nobody quite knew what to make of him. He slept in the basement, a wide modern space with white coffered ceilings and plush carpeting, which he shared with Enver and a small Turkish kid named Keyah who had come to America to learn English and so far had learned none. Enver took an active dislike to Musa, but was gone most of the time—out working his daytime job at a laboratory or his nighttime hustle of buying and reselling expensive medical equipment. This meant that Musa and Keyah had the basement to themselves, and since neither of them could easily communicate with the other, they were also effectively alone.

Whenever Henry went down to the basement—to do a load of laundry, or use the basement bathroom—he would see Musa dressed in his white cotton thobe and sitting cross-legged on his sleeping pad on the floor. Usually he had his laptop out and was absorbed in youtube videos of fiery salafi preachers talking about sin and damnation, or he had the Quran open on his knees, his fingers to his temples as he memorized verses in urgent whispers. Sometimes Musa and Keyah would be sitting together on the saggy couch, watching reruns of The Golden Girls, Musa in his dirty white undershirt and basketball shorts, Keyah in his knock-off polo shirt and khakis, not understanding the jokes that made Musa laugh uproariously.

Once Henry was going down the stairs to the basement just as Musa was coming up bearing a plate with the crumbs of a tuna sandwich. Henry gave him a friendly nod. Musa smiled at him, his big red cheeks so round that it seemed he could hold a giant
lollipop in each of them. At the last minute he stuck his hand out and intercepted Henry’s in a fleshy handshake that stopped them both in the middle of the stairs.

“Brother, can I ask you, are you married?”

Henry laughed. “No. I’m not married, man.”

“Do you want to be?”

Henry grew somber. “Yes, I’d like to be someday. Inshaallah.”

“Good, brother. Alhamdulillah. Marriage is half of religion. Tell me. Do you know what is the best quality for a husband to have?”

“Uhm…”

“It’s piety. To be a true and sincere believer.” Musa smiled at him so hard that it seemed his lollipop cheeks might burst. “And do you know what the best quality in a wife is? Humility. Alhamdulillah, brother. May Allah grant us all wives who are true believers.” Musa hugged him with his free arm, so close and tight that their necks pressed together, and proceeded up the stairs. Henry remained frozen on the steps, trying to remember why he had been going down to the basement in the first place.

“Did Musa try to give you guys marriage advice?”

Henry was sitting on the front porch with Amar and Enver while they smoked apple sheesha. It was early evening, and from time to time neighbors returning from work pulled into the housing complex parking lot.

Amar laid a meaty hand on Henry’s knee and massaged it suggestively. “I can just imagine Henry on his wedding night, some lucky girl is gonna be screaming, ‘Oh, Henry!’”

Henry chuckled uncomfortably and removed Amar’s hand from his knee.

“Thanks, Amar. I appreciate the… vote of confidence.”

Enver saw Henry’s look. “We’re just kidding, Mama Hen. Yeah, he says that shit to everyone. He told me that the best way to get a chick was God-consciousness.”

Enver lifted the silver mouthpiece to his lips, and the water bubbled in the dark green base of the hookah.

“You know what I think.” Amar was grinning hysterically. “I think we don’t need any goddamn salafis!” He laughed like it was a joke.

Enver passed the hookah to Amar and blew out a plume of spoke. The dank odor of apple tobacco curled through the air. Henry leaned back onto his elbows against the stairs. Overhead the sky was turning a deep shade of violet. One of the neighbors, a rotund and cheerful white man who worked in defense, got out of his car and waved at them. Henry smiled and returned the wave as the man went up the steps and into the house next door. Amar and Enver pretended not to see him.

“Musa’s had a rough life,” said Henry. “We should cut him some slack.”

Enver looked over his shoulder at Henry. “Bro, I haven’t exactly had an easy life. Neither has Amar. And we’re doing just fine. You hear me, Amar?”

“Yeah, I hear you.” Amar drew on the hookah and exhaled. He tapped one hand against the side of his knee. “Ha. Actually, what am I saying? Here I am, twenty-six
years old, no job, no girlfriend, living with a bunch of sexually repressed Muslim dudes. I’m a complete fuck up.”

Everyone knew that Musa had converted while he was in prison. They knew this in the same way that everyone knew Karim saw a psychiatrist, Junaid’s family was rich, Enver smoked weed, and Javad was Shia and gay though he pretended to be Sunni and straight. They knew because Qasim was a blabbermouth. It was said in the DC Muslim community that if you wanted everybody to know something, the fastest way was to entrust it as a secret to Qasim Bhatti. And few were more privileged and more vulnerable to Qasim’s bad habit than the misfits whom he graciously gave a place to live. In the three days between Musa’s arrival and Qasim’s departure, Qasim had told the story every chance he got: how a board member at Dar al-Hijrah had contacted him about Musa, how they had asked if he had room for a convert who had just gotten out of prison, how Musa was living with an alcoholic uncle who didn’t approve of his new religion. Qasim shook his head. “How could I say no?” he had said to Henry in the laundry room, the day before he got on a plane for South Korea.

Qasim’s absence posed a minor problem for the house. Though Qasim was hardly responsible and barely an adult, he commanded some respect by virtue of being older and owning the place where they lived. Henry figured the best he could do as Qasim’s temporary replacement was be helpful and likeable. He helped Keyah use google maps so he could figure out the new bus route to his community college. He enquired about Karim’s IBD from time to time, and reminded him about his Wednesday appointment with his therapist. He gave Amar and Junaid rides to the metro station. He
listened patiently while Javad told him how he was persecuted by a sassy barista at his favorite coffee shop. When it came to Musa, Henry decided that he should help him get a better meal than tuna sandwiches. And because Henry believed in the old maxim about teaching beggars to fish, he took Musa with him to the grocery store.

“See, man? There’s a whole kosher chicken section.”

Musa cautiously leaned over the drumsticks and thighs in the open air refrigerator as if he were peering over a precipice. He smiled his enormous smile at Henry.

“Brother, are you sure that kosher is halal? Allah, subhanahu wa tala, says in the Quran that it is forbidden to eat meat that is not consecrated in His name.”

“Yeah, man. I know. But the Jewish God is also our God, which makes kosher halal.”

“I see. JazakaAllah, brother.” Musa did not sound convinced.

“It’s halal. Kosher is halal. Just trust me on this. Here. Take some.” Henry threw two styrofoam packages of drumsticks into Musa’s basket.

Musa continued to smile.

“SubhanAllah, brother. I can see that you have the kindness of a true believer. Someday when I am rich, inshaAllah, I hope I can repay you for your kindness.”

They turned down an aisle, past clear plastic bags of dried fruits and nuts. Henry unhooked a pack of beef jerky from an endcap display. Musa had worn his white thobe and a white Islamic skull cap to the grocery store. People occasionally stared at him.

“Brother.” A strain appeared in Musa’s smile. “Doesn’t this store have any Kellogg’s cereal?”

“What?”

“Oh.” Henry looked at the rows of dull brown boxes with names like Bran Flakes and High Fiber Cereal. “Sorry, man. I guess they don’t have that here.”

Musa closely inspected a box of Wheatie O’s before putting it in his basket with the chicken legs. “Froot Loops is the best cereal, brother. I would eat Froot Loops every day if I could.”

“I’ve never had it,” said Henry.

Musa looked at him like he was crazy.

That evening Henry made stir fry veggies and lemon basil chicken, which was one of three kinds of chicken he knew how to bake. He made Musa help him prepare the marinade and chop the vegetables so he could show him how it was done. Karim, in a daze of seroquel, sat in a chair at the filthy glass kitchen table, apparently just for company. Musa talked about his plans to sell electronic Qurans while they worked.

“I don’t get it,” said Henry. “So, they’re Qurans, but they’re in a tablet or something? Like an app?”

Musa paused in the middle of slicing an onion. “SubhanAllah, brother. I’m so glad that you asked. See, the way it works is, you’ve got an electronic pen that you press on the verse that you want.” Musa held up a hand as if he had an invisible stylus and pressed it onto an imaginary page. “The verse is written with a special chemical ink so the pen can recognize it and recite the verse to you in English or Arabic.”

“Oh, wow. Wow. That’s so cool,” said Karim. He chuckled for no reason.

Musa smiled at him. Karim smiled wanly from outer space. Henry continued rubbing spices over raw chicken in his mixing bowl.
“I still don’t get it. Why would people buy that? You could just download an app or use a website that does the same thing for free.”

“Oh, yeah…,” said Karim. “True. That’s true.”

Musa looked at Henry. For once he did not smile. “It’s truly miraculous, brother. I wish I had one to show you, so you would understand.”

Henry watched Musa chopping onions with excruciating slowness. He had had to teach Musa how to hold the knife before they could get started.

“So you’re going to sell these things. That’s cool, man. Tell me more.”

“Do you know IMC? A friend of mine from mosque who knows their CEO. They’re going to let us sell a hundred of their electronic Qurans initially. My friend already has them in his basement.”

“Oh, yeah,” Karim piped up. “IMC. Wow. Yeah. Aren’t they… isn’t that the bookstore by the Islamic heritage museum in Anacostia. Wow. Amazing….” Karim sat up and looked around the kitchen as if seeing everything for the very first time. “Hey, guys. Can I help with something?”

Henry gestured at a baking tray and box of aluminum foil with his dirty chicken hands. Karim stood up slowly and shuffled across the kitchen. “Oh, you want me to… oh, cool, wow, got it. Awesome… so glad I can help you guys.” Karim smiled at no one.

“Is this place going to hire you guys?”

“Alhamdulillah, brother. They have promised we can work on commission.” Henry laughed bitterly. “Musa, man. That’s a terrible idea.”
Musa looked up sharply. “Do you know why it is better for a true believer to work on commission, brother? It is because then he owns all the fruits of his labors and his mistakes. This is a form of tawakkul, of trust in Allah. Surah Talaq says that He will provide in ways unimaginable to any who put their trust in Him.”

“You’re right. You’re right,” said Henry gently. “Mashaallah, man. I admire your faith. But… part of trusting in Allah is also using the brain He gave us to figure out rational causes and effects. Think about it this way. How much is your commission? Ten percent? Twenty?”

Musa’s face darkened. “I don’t know,” he said. “My friend knows. He said we would sell them together in Philadelphia.”

“Alright, let’s say twenty percent,” Henry said quickly. “Just for the sake of argument, okay? Twenty percent, and you sell a hundred electronic Qurans, and then split it two ways. That’s a hundred dollars each. Now subtract all your costs, and divide by the amount of time it took you to sell them. If you’re making more than a baseline rate, let’s say minimum wage, then that’s good. If not, I’d reconsider it.”

Musa frowned. “And you think I should calculate all of that out beforehand?”

Henry laughed. “Yes, definitely! You’re a smart guy. I don’t know why this is such a surprise to you.”

While Musa seemed to think about this, Henry finished laying out the breast fillets on the baking tray that Karim had wrapped with excessive aluminum foil. He motioned Karim to open the oven door and slid the chicken in. Karim hovered anxiously by the countertop, then shuffled back to his chair. Henry flipped the faucet on with his elbows and started washing his hands.
“So what’s your sales pitch?”

This time Musa smiled at him. “Brother, you shouldn’t have to ask. Allah Himself is the Greatest Sales Pitch there ever was.”

Henry laughed at that. Musa did too.

An hour later, the three of them sat down to a dinner of baked chicken, stir fry, and buttered toast. Karim made appreciative noises the entire meal. Musa said it was the best thing he’d eaten in a long time and started on his second plate as soon as he finished his first.

“Mashaallah,” a voice came from the front door. “What a heavenly aroma.”

“Plenty more,” Henry called out from the living room.

“Is that Mama Henry?” Junaid stuck his head around the corner and saw the three of them sitting on the folding chairs at the edge of the living room prayer space. He nodded at Musa and Karim. “Good evening, gentlemen. Perhaps I might join you?”

“Help yourself, man.”

Junaid went into the kitchen and came back with half a plate. “Barak Allah feekum. To whom do I owe my gratitude?”

“It was a group effort,” said Henry.

“But brother Henry did most of the work,” added Musa.

When they were done, Musa insisted on washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen. Henry went to sleep that night with a feeling of accomplishment. But the next day, Musa was back to eating tuna sandwiches. The two packages of kosher drumsticks that Henry had bought for Musa collected ice crystals in the freezer. A few days later, Henry found a half finished bag of sour skittles in the refrigerator.
Enver was in the kitchen making himself a cup of coffee. “That’s your boy, Musa’s. I saw him eating it for breakfast the other day.”

Henry shut the refrigerator door. “What the hell,” he said.

The tale of Musa’s electronic Quran business had also gotten around the house. Henry wasn’t sure if Musa had confided it to one of the others, or if someone had overheard their conversation in the kitchen. For all he knew, he could have pulled a Qasim and accidentally blabbed it himself.

“Bro, something’s off about this guy. I’m telling you.”

Enver, Henry, and Amar were upstairs in Qasim’s master bedroom. Amar was standing against the wall by an old oaken coat rack. Henry was sitting at Qasim’s desk, and Enver was on the floor with his back against the footboard of the bed. They had the door shut.

“I don’t know,” said Henry. “He seems harmless, man.”

“All that talk about selling Qurans is bogus. Nobody’s stupid enough to think you can make money doing that. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Henry. “I kinda told him the same thing. But I think maybe we’re jumping to conclusions here just because he’s different than us.”

Enver leaned forward intently. “What do you mean different? Bro, I grew up in the hood. He’s not different. I’ve known a hundred guys like him, and this guy is out to hustle us.”

“I can hear you guys in there!” It was Javad in the hallway.

“Oh God,” said Henry.
Javad threw the door open and sat down on the floor next to Enver. “So, what’re we talking about? Oh, don’t tell me. We’re bashing the salafi in the basement, right? Do you want to hear my opinion?”

Enver grinned at Henry and Amar. “Yeah, Javad. We want to hear all about it.”

Javad reached behind him and swung the door shut. “Fuck that guy. Fuck that guy. Fuck that guy. That’s what I think.”

“What’d he do to you, Javad?” said Henry.

Javad’s jaw reddened beneath his immaculate three-day shadow. “He gave me a brochure after we prayed asr together. A how-to-guide for the fiqh of prayer. Can you fucking believe it?” He saw their stares. “Oh, fuck you guys too! You don’t understand. He asked me what I thought of Abu Bakr. I had to put on my big plastic smile and pretend I didn’t know what he meant. That is some heinous microagression shit. Do you get it now?”

“Is this because… you pray differently than us?” said Henry.

Javad waved an arm at them. “Oh, please. As if you don’t all know already. Yes, it’s because I’m shia. Ugh.”

Henry saw Amar’s lips twitch. He was fiddling with the elastic hem of his basketball shorts.

“What about you, Amar? You’re weirdly quiet.”

Amar’s eyes slid around the room. “I stole his wallet.”

“You what?”

“Ha. Yeah. See. What I did was, I waited until he was asleep, and then I went downstairs and stole his wallet.”
For a moment nobody spoke.

Henry laughed in spite of himself. “Why would you do that?”

“So I could take a picture of his driver’s license.” Amar looked at them. “What? All you motherfuckers keep saying you don’t trust him. He comes in here saying his name is Musa Williams, it could be Osama bin Laden for all you know. What’re you gonna do if we have to call the cops on him? Now I’ve got his real name and home address.”

“Wow,” said Javad. “Just wow. That is the realest shit I have heard since my mother told me to quit trying to be an actor and get an accounting degree instead.”

“My boy Amar.” Enver got up and threw Amar a slap and slide handshake. “So what’s his name?”

“Darrell.”

“No freaking way,” said Henry.

“Yeah. The funny thing is, I think Keyah might have seen me putting the wallet back. He probably woke up in the middle of the night, and said, ‘Am I dreaming, or is there some big hairy Arab dude in his boxers sneaking around Musa’s bed?’ Ha ha! You feel me?” Amar jostled Javad with his elbow.

“O dear Lord.” Javad made the sign of the cross over himself, then laughed.

“Why am I crossing myself? I’m not Catholic.”

“I still cannot believe you did that,” said Henry.

“You know me,” said Amar.
Javad opened the door. “I’m just glad we’re all on the same page about our fundie roomie. When our dear friend Qasim comes back, let’s be sure to tell him he’s an idiot. Yallah, bye.” Javad slipped into the hallway.

Henry stood and hitched up his pants.

“Alright, good talk, guys. Let me know if anything else happens.”

Amar and Enver looked at each other. “Hey, Henry. Are the sufis gonna roll through this weekend even though Qasim’s gone?”

“Yeah, pretty sure Junaid said they would.” Henry shrugged. “You never know, man. Musa could be totally cool with sufis.”

Enver shot Henry a wolfish grin. “Bro, are you kidding me? I bet he’s gonna shit his pants.”

But they never got the chance to find out, because two days later Musa was gone. Nobody knew exactly when or how he left. They interrogated Keyah, who had been the only one home during the day, and he indicated through gestures and broken English that Musa had taken his blue roller suitcase and simply walked out the front door.

When Henry texted him, Musa’s reply was brief and ambiguous:

Gone to Philly.

In the days following Musa’s unexpected departure, a sense of relief pervaded in the house. Although Henry reminded them that Musa said he would be coming back, none of them seemed to believe it, as if all along they had expected Musa to simply disappear one day. With Musa gone, their bafflement at his behavior, their irritation and distrust, vanished just as conveniently. In his absence, Musa was finally understandable.
There was also a sense of things returning back to normal, which included the monthly gathering for Qasim and Junaid’s sufī tariqa. The first time Henry had encountered the sufis, it had been at the end of his first week in the house. He had come home late from his internship and found the front door wide open. Noise, laughter, and a thick yellow light spilled from the house into the night across the rubber welcome mat. In the living room prayer space, heavy blue blankets had been laid down, and men and women were sitting on the floor drinking tea, smoking sheesha.

Henry had found Qasim in the kitchen brewing a pot of chai. Qasim chuckled when he saw him. “People come over after our monthly gathering. It’s a great experience, bro. Very spiritual. But, hey, grab a seat for now, make some new friends.”

Henry had spent most of the night observing everything from a corner with Karim. As the night wore on, Karim fell asleep propped up against the wall, and Henry felt a dazed sense of euphoria. He hadn’t known that Muslims could do things like this, and although he hadn’t talked to a single one of them, watching this room full of strangers made him feel like an explorer in a new world where he suddenly might belong.

Now with Qasim gone, Henry set out to prepare for their guests. He came home early on Friday to clean the bathrooms and vacuum the floors. It was a big house, three floors, four bathrooms, but he was ready by the time they started showing up by the carload at ten. Henry stood beside the yellow lantern at the entrance to the house and waved them inside through a cloud of moths.

Junaid popped out of one of the cars with a pretty girl in a mint green shalwar kameez at his side. Junaid grasped Henry by the arm. “Thank you for cleaning, akhy.”

“Is that one of your housemates?” asked the girl.
“That is the king of the housemates,” declared Junaid with a wink to Henry.

While she was taking off her shoes at the threshold, the girl caught Henry looking at her. A smile fluttered across her lips before she disappeared into the house.

Inside, Amar was in the kitchen making the chai. Karim was in the living room to offer guests cookies and biscuits. Enver and Javad, who had been living in the house the longest, knew most of the sufi tariqa and were already catching up with old acquaintances. Lighters clicked over coals, and the air grew fragrant with sheesh smoking. Junaid picked up the well-worn tabla from a pile of cushions, and a large man in a purple robe took up the rhythm and chanted a song of praise.

Henry spent most of the night shuttling between the kitchen and the living room. Plates, fruit platters, teacups, napkins, water, sheesha coals, plastic hookah mouth tips, and a steady supply of juice boxes for a pair of little girls aged seven and five who ran around the basement and kept trying to talk to Keyah. The night passed by in a blur.

When Henry went around the room offering the last of the cookies and biscuits, he passed by the girl in the mint green kameez.

“It’s a shame Qasim couldn’t be here,” she said, as she lifted an Oreo from the sterling silver platter.

Henry smiled and felt his hands tremble. “Yeah,” he said. “Such a shame. How are you?”

But Henry had mistaken pleasantries for an opening and she, not hearing him over the din, had already turned to the man beside her.

At some point in the night when most of the guests had left, but some seemed determined to stay forever, Henry went upstairs to get a new roll of toilet paper and found
Karim standing in the darkness, weeping against the wall. His shirt was damp with sweat or tears. He shuddered when Henry touched him on the shoulder.

“What is happening?” Karim’s voice was hoarse with terror. His eyes seemed not to see anything. “Oh, God. Don’t make me watch again.”

“Come on, Karim.” Henry stroked his back and led him to his room.

Henry put him to bed fully clothed and tucked him in like a child. Then he pulled up the hard Windsor chair that Karim kept beside the desk, and he sat there. Every time Karim whimpered or cried out, Henry laid a hand on his blanketed shoulder and softly patted him, and every time it calmed him, as if the touch of someone else’s hand was all that Karim required to exorcise what troubled him.

In the morning, while everyone was still asleep, Henry went downstairs and gathered up the filthy plates and cups, threw out the spoiled fruits and vegetables, and set the dishwasher to maximum. Then he went upstairs, got back into bed, and did not get up until noon.

Thursday that week, Henry came home from his internship in a bad mood. It was a sticky September evening and the wait at the bus stop had been longer than usual. It was also trash night and he knew he would have to harangue his housemates to take out the trash. Javad, Enver, and Keyah were on the front porch smoking a joint when he walked up to the house.

“If the neighbors see you out here, Qasim’s going to get hell from the HOA.”

“Hey, Mama Hen. Your boy’s back,” said Enver.

“He Who Shall Not Be Named,” said Javad with a shrill little laugh.
Keyah was sitting on the bottom step with the joint. He took a hit and wordlessly offered it to Henry.

Henry walked past them. “Guess I’ll go talk to him then.”

“Bro.” Enver stood and lowered his voice. “I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job, but you better have a good long talk with him. I was questioning Musa for a whole hour about where he’s been and what he’s been doing. Some of the stuff he’s saying doesn’t make any sense.”

Henry looked Enver in the eyes, then he looked down and turned his key in the latch. “Alright, man. I will. Thanks for looking out. And I’m serious. Stop smoking that shit on the porch.” He went into the house and stalked upstairs to take a shower first.

Thirty minutes later, Henry found Musa in the basement folding a pile of freshly laundered clothes on his old sleeping pad. He was wearing his white cotton thobe and his skull cap around his short curly hair.

“Hey, salaams, man. Look who’s back.”

Musa smiled. “Wa ‘alaikum as-salaam wa rahmat Allah wa barakatuhu. Brother, it’s so good to see you.”

Henry sat down on the couch. “So. How was Philadelphia?”

“It was good, brother. Alhamdulillah.”

“Did you guys sell all the electronic Qurans you had?”

“I have faith, iman fii Allah, that we will inshaAllah.” Musa started bunching white socks together and tossing them into his open suitcase.
Henry sat deeper into the couch and crossed his legs. He noticed how Musa’s shoulder blades and back muscles moved like ocean swells beneath the thin white fabric of his thobe.

“Well, how many did you guys sell then?”

Musa paused. “We didn’t sell any, brother.”

“None? How could you sell none? Where in Philly were you guys?”

“We never got to Philly.”

“You just said you were there.”

“We meant to go to Philly, brother. We made niyah to go.”

“But you never went? So where were you?”

“We were in Annandale.”

Henry leaned forward. “Let me get this straight. You didn’t go to Philly. And you didn’t sell any Qurans. You’ve been in Annandale this entire time.”

Musa had stopped folding his clothes and stood looking out the basement window with his back to Henry. “Yes, brother. Like I said.”

“Annandale as in Annandale, Virginia. As in a fifteen minute drive from here.”

Musa didn’t say anything.

“Well, what happened? It took you nine days to come back here?”

Musa shook his head. “I don’t know what to say. One of the other brothers was down here earlier and—“

“Enver. It was Enver probably.”
“Yes, thank you, brother. That was his name. I told him as well. My friend Hisham was supposed to go up to Philly with me to sell the Qurans, but we never went because we needed his cousin’s car.”

“And?”

Musa bent down to rearrange his folded clothes into his suitcase. Henry thought for a moment that Musa might be crying, but then Musa turned toward him and flashed his unassailable smile. “He never came, brother. We spent all nine days waiting for him. If you don’t mind, I have to pray asr now before the time comes. JazakaAllah for your concern.”

That night, after forcing everyone to take out the trash, Henry sat down at the dirty glass kitchen table and started looking for jobs to apply to. Shortly after midnight, he went upstairs to his room. As he fell asleep, he thought about how in the morning everything would start all over again.

To his surprise, it was Musa who first realized there would be a problem. Musa caught him in the living room shortly after maghrib the next day and asked if he could speak to him. They sat down in the basement. Henry on the couch again. Musa on his sleeping mat.

“Brother, do you know the saying that religion is advice?”

“I do,” said Henry.

“I need your advice.” He paused. “How do I get the other brothers to like me?”

Henry was taken off guard. “Like you?” He laughed. “Musa, man. You just… You’ve just gotta open up a little more. You hardly talk to anyone but me. Tell them
something personal about yourself. And honestly, you’ve got to try to… humanize yourself a little more.”

Musa smiled. Henry sensed he hadn’t said what Musa wanted.

“The thing is, man. They just don’t understand you. All this stuff with the electronic Qurans… and disappearing without a word for nine days. Normal people don’t do that. I think if you could just explain it all to them, honestly, like the good Muslim I know you are, they’d start trusting you a lot more.”

Musa smoothed his thobe over his lap. He looked up at Henry. “Thank you, brother. I will think about your advice. If you could talk to the other brothers, I would appreciate it.”

Henry promised that he would, but he did not realize how quickly he would. Not more than an hour later, Amar waylaid him in the kitchen.


Henry was standing over the sink, eating an overripe peach. “Sure, man. What is it?”

“Ha. Yeah. I can’t explain. Just come upstairs to Q’s room when you get a sec.”

When Henry got upstairs, he found everyone except Musa waiting for him in Qasim’s room. Enver was sitting at the desk looking at his phone. Keyah and Karim were cross-legged on the floor. Amar had his back against the wall beside the coat rack again. Junaid was sitting on the bed with a troubled face. Javad was pacing in the middle of the room.

Henry looked at their expressions. “Oh shit,” he said.
Enver came over to him and closed the door. “Bro, we wanted to talk to you.

Keyah, yeah, you, Keyah, tell Henry what you told us.”

Everyone turned to the little Turk sitting on the floor. Keyah looked at all of them from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. He said something to himself in Turkish.


Keyah pointed downstairs. “Musa.”

“What about Musa?” said Henry.

“Pretty lady. No clothes.” Keyah made an emphatic slashing motion. “No clothes.” He turned his back to them, held up an imaginary phone with one hand, and made another motion with his other hand. “I. I look him. He look me.” Keyah looked at them, and made the jerking off motion some more.

Junaid stood up abruptly. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen.” He clapped Henry on the shoulder, then opened the door and left. Amar closed the door behind him.

They were all looking at Henry expectantly, and Henry refused to say anything.

Javad stopped pacing and turned to Henry. “We want Musa to leave.”

“Because he masturbates? So what?” said Henry. “I bet half of you jerked off in the shower today.”

Enver’s mouth twisted into a grin, then back into a straight line. “Bro, I’m not saying people don’t jerk off every now and then. But what kinda person does it while some other dude is watching?”

Javad started pacing again. “I just don’t feel safe with him in the house anymore. Something is wrong with that boy.”
Karim was curled against the baseboard, his head resting between his knees. He did not seem to hear anything they were saying.

“Amar, what about you?”

“Yeah. See. The thing is. For me, it’s not so much about the pornography. Ha. What bugs me is… What am I trying to say?” Amar tilted his head forward and massaged the back of his neck. His hand tousled the hair on the back of his head. He looked up.

“Yeah. I just don’t trust him.”

Henry looked around the room, and saw how it would go. In the end, they put it to a vote. Javad, Amar, Enver and Keyah all voted for Musa to leave. The only ones who voted for him to stay were Henry and Karim.

That same night, Henry went down to the basement to tell Musa what had been decided. He would apologize, and apologize, but the ultimatum would be the same. Musa would listen quietly and say very little for once. They had decided on a three day grace period, but he would need only one. The following morning he would ask Enver, of all people, to drop him off at the bus station with his things.

But as Henry descended down the white carpeted steps to the basement, he found himself thinking not of the future, but of the day he had met Musa. Henry and Junaid had gone to pick him up at Qasim’s behest. They had driven nearly an hour into a part of Virginia where the August air was stifling hot and traffic lights were slung from thick black cables over the intersections.

Musa had been unresponsive over the phone, and they had waited several minutes in the foyer of a red brick building identical to every other building on the street. Junaid was dialing the number again, and Henry was checking the time on his phone, when
Musa appeared on the landing above them. He was wearing his simple white thobe and sandals, the skullcap over his hair. He was beaming at them.

“I just know you two are Muslims. Am I right?”

“as-salaamu alaikum,” said Junaid. “You must be brother Musa.”

“wa-alaikum as-salaam!” He bounded down the stairs and pressed Junaid’s hands into his.

Henry came forward. “Hey, I’m Henry. Salaamu alaikum.”

He took Henry’s hand and shook it. He smelled of the musky perfume that some men wore to mosque. “Henry,” he said. “Are you a convert too, Henry?”

Henry cracked a smile. “Yeah. Alhamdulillah. I am.”

Musa stood back and looked at them like they were wonders to behold. “Let me get my things, inshaAllah.” He raced back up to the landing where he paused and looked down at them again. “SubhanAllah, brothers. This is a great day. A great, great day.”

Then he had smiled at them and disappeared.

* * *

Henry moved out of the house that winter, and life seemed to move more quickly then. His internship turned into a permanent position. He fell in love with a Muslim girl and married her six months later. They moved into a modest English basement on a quiet street in DC proper. In autumn, yellow leaves blown by the wind collected against the frosted casement windows and filled the bedroom with a dim and restless light.

Eventually they both received promotions at their jobs, which allowed them to move to a
bigger apartment in the same neighborhood. They talked about buying a house in the
suburbs, having children, saving for retirement.

Qasim took them out to dinner right after they got married. He asked Henry’s
wife to think of him as her older brother, just as he considered Henry his little brother.
She found Qasim amusing and endearing. They promised to get dinner together once
every few months, though in practice it happened once a year. Henry saw the others even
less. Karim moved out of the house shortly after Henry did, and although they tried to
keep in touch, it was hard to know what was happening with Karim. Enver eventually
married and went to medical school. Amar stayed in the house until Qasim kicked him
out, and then he simply moved all of his things from Qasim’s house to a friend’s couch in
Alexandria. Javad became an English teacher and moved to Dubai where he once again
had to pretend to be Sunni and straight.

Henry never saw Musa again, but Junaid did. Junaid was at a national Muslim
conference in Chicago, wandering through the booths and stalls of the vendors bazaar
when he saw a familiar smiling face. Musa had married as well and had a baby girl. He
was at the conference selling electronic Qurans. During their brief conversation, they
avoided talking about many things. So Junaid couldn’t say whether Musa was making
his living as a Quran salesman or if it was just his weekend job. But before a customer
came and Junaid excused himself, Musa asked him to give Henry a message for him, a
saying so common it was formulaic, and yet to Musa surely one with meaning.

Peace and good tidings, brother. I hope you are well.
The cherry trees outside are late in the blossoming cycle and the wind shakes petals from their branches in such number that they collect in dunes and drifts against the windward side of the plank fence at the end of the yard. The late morning sun slants through the treetops, and dappled light falls onto the window screen, then penetrates deep into the apartment until everything seems touched by shifting sun and shadow: the tidy kitchenette, the spartan furnishings, a stack of newspapers, and a quiet man.  

He is breakfasting on jasmine tea and rye toast spread with apricot preserves while he scans the day’s newspaper, more for ritual than for reading. His right hand alternates between tea and toast, dragging them up and across his body in slow sweeping motions that end at his chin, as if he were pantomiming a pensive violinist dragging out the notes of a sonata written on the newsprint before him. When he finishes, he stacks the paper atop the older ones and then he leans back in his chair and stares at an indeterminate spot on the ceiling. What transfixes him there only he can know, and he stares for a very long time.  

Embers of the morning fire still glow in the hearth. He rises to scatter them and shuts the face glass across the fireplace. He dons his shoes and coat, slings a heavy canvas sack over his shoulder, and steps out of the apartment.  

The town is small, and he has only to turn the corner to reach the main thoroughfare. It is Saturday, and the wind is not bad between the storefronts, so more than a few people are out. In front of the grocery store, a girl with strawberry hair grips her banana in two hands, and she sits with her feet up on the concrete bench, sideways
and hunched into herself, as if she were jealously guarding her banana from view. Coming towards him, a matronly woman hugs her oversized laundry basket to one hip. She has a rolling gait and to compensate for the weight of the laundry basket she leans back as she moves forward, arching and gliding with the likeness of a sail billowing down the street towards the laundromat.

The town’s gang of old men has set up camp in front of the display window at El Padrino’s Hardware and Supply. He has secretly dubbed them The Five. Invariably two of them are to be seen puzzling over a chessboard, a third hovers around them, signing his approval or disapproval of the game in nods or wobbly shakes of his head, and the remaining two slouch in lawn chairs off to one side, waxing eloquent about the weather or matters related to the fields and their husbandry. They change positions from time to time, so a sitter becomes a player, the player hovers about the board, and the hovering one lowers himself into his waiting seat with a creaking sigh—all this without a word or signal between them.

Once or twice he has tried to guess at the origins of The Five and their silent permutations, some storied history to account for faces wrinkled beyond all reckoning of age. But he could never get it quite right; and then again, they are just five inseparable old men.

“There’s that nice Japanese fellow,” one of the sitters whispers loudly to his neighbor.

“Well, isn’t that something. Haven’t seen a Japanese around here since nineteen sixty-four,” says the other.
“Now that can’t be right. You saw him yesterday, sure as I’m sitting here talking to you.”

“Yesterday? Wasn’t it yesterday that it rained all hell…”

He smiles and raises a hand in hello to them. The two sitters grin back at him toothlessly, the one hovering around the chess board absently waves, the players remain immersed in their game. He keeps moving down the street.

By the church a pair of gnat catchers are adroitly practicing their trade from perches on the telephone wires. They leap into the open air, hanging poised there for a second, then they flare their wings and bank and stretch, or tuck their wings and dive and twist, and their thin bills snap against the paling sky. A lazy tabby cat tracks their aerobatics with lidded eyes from beneath the oak tree where he is sprawled like a blaspheming sphinx on the lush church lawn.

The man turns south onto a country road. The gas station and mini mart combination is the last establishment on the way out of town. The retro metal canopy is rusting and the fuel pumps register gallons and dollars on old turn-dial displays. The mini mart is off to one side of the gas station, and his gait breaks only slightly before he turns into the parking lot. He pushes through the glass door—a bell rings—and he immediately heads to the back wall freezer where the homemade ice cream is arrayed on shelves: strawberry, chocolate, vanilla.

The woman at the register watches him with interest. She leans over the counter on her elbows; her chin rests on her upturned palms, and her hands and fingers curl up and around her oval face like a flower bract for her dandelion hair.
After short deliberation he selects chocolate—he always selects chocolate—and brings it to the counter. She waits for him to approach before pushing herself off the counter. She seems unnaturally tall to him, and something about the way she walks, the straight-backed posture, the tautness of her upper thighs and buttocks, the small steps and careful movements, makes him wonder if she wears high heels for her everyday work at the gas station mini mart. He has often wanted to lean over the counter and peek at her shoes.

She rings him up for one homemade chocolate ice cream; he pays in exact change.

There was a time when she used to try to lure him into conversation. She would guess his age—38? Higher? Lower? Which turned to guessing his name—It’s just got to be Bob. No? Shucks. She offered to read his palms once. His only response had been an ambiguous smile.

“Collecting driftwood again, Bob?” she nods at the canvas sack slung over his shoulder.

“Yep.”

“That wind sure is something today.”

“Yes, it certainly is.”

“Well, you have a good one, Mike.” She winks playfully at him.

When he shuts the door behind him, he takes a look at her through the glass, a lingering look, but one of lustless yearning, more for the idea of the woman than the woman herself, her touchability, her warmth, the color of her irises, the shape of her eyes.

Does she have sultry eyes? Are they sultry? He can’t tell.
Back on the country road, he eats the homemade ice cream slowly with a tiny plastic spoon. When he is done, he tosses spoon and cup alike into the sack. The township’s buildings dissipate into sporadic farmhouses set back down long dirt driveways. One of the farmhouses has planted cherry trees to one side of the driveway, and flurries of their white petals twist and braid across each other as the wind chases them down the road.

He can see the lake in the distance now, on the far side of the fallows where farmhands in masks are burning the winter scrub off the fields. The shoreline itself is obscured in the swathe of cattails that have flourished in the shallows, but the lake curves toward him inexorably until there is nothing between him and the waters murking up from the feet of the reeds but the sharp gravel embankment of the road.

The narrow beach begins where the reeds thin out, and he walks down to the water’s edge to pick through the twisted limbs and scraps of driftwood on the sand. The driftwood is scarce, but the beach is long, and he is in no hurry. He searches out the older drier pieces. They will make a fine fire should he have need for it tomorrow morning, and he tosses them into the sack where they knock together hollowly at his back.

When the sack is half full, he stops collecting. By now the town is a smudge on the far shore, and the forklifts and tractors on the fields look like children’s toys, but he continues on. He likes it out here: the crunch and pop of the pebbles beneath his feet, the solemn sway of the grasses, the tuneless whistle of the wind through the shrubs, the stark vastness of open country, a pervading reverence in the quiet that is broken only by the tearing noise of solitary cars hurtling by on the road above him.
The beach ends abruptly, and he begins to trek through the pine forest that stretches from the farthest shore to the emerald mountains on the south horizon. Midway through the pines a rising shelf of basalt bars his way. It abuts the lake shore to his left, and to his right it runs unbroken as far as he can see, save for the surgical incision that has been dynamited into the stone to make way for the road.

Rather than turn aside and follow the road through, he makes his way up the gentle gradient. He is quickly short of breath and his hands slack dangerously on the canvas sack, but his body’s incompliance makes him stubborn and he pushes himself harder up the slope. Stunted juniper trees have seeded and rooted in the cracks along the stone surface, and he moves among them as through a crowd of mute spectators bearing witness to his ascent. Once he attains the modest summit, he rests in a shallow saddle bow where the wind is diminished. He rests a long while, but by the time he begins his descent his hands are still dumb and clammy. The backside of the basalt shelf is steeper, and he has to follow a narrow erosion gully. It is not far but the going is slow. The gully spits him out onto the small mound of alluvial debris piled at its mouth. There he rests once more, longer this time, drawing air in raggedly.

He drops down among the pines and their heady scent again. Eventually the forest veers away from the lake and a series of dry flats lead the way back into town. The flats are bound by the crescent curve of the lake on one side and the straight-edge line of a state highway on the other. The thin rushing sound of many distant cars grows louder as the highway and the shoreline draw closer together.

By now he has slowed to half his former pace. The wind is picking up out on the lake, and huddles of geese and ducks shelter in the leeward calms behind sand bars and
grassy islets. Humpbacked clouds are scudding across the sky in herds and packs that tend towards the northeast while from the fields, the forests, the slopes of hills and the town in the distance rise amber columns of solid light, and they are holding the cumuliform ceiling aloft over the variegated floor of the earth.

Thickets of birch dot the land, and their skeletal branches shake and rattle against each other. In one of those thickets lies a dead fox. He spies it from afar, and the faint trail he is following takes him right past it. Up close the fox’s matted silver fur glistens darkly along its fractured neck, and the rocks leading back to the highway are smeared with crimson. He takes in the details of the crooked neck, the snarling lips, the pointed teeth, the nimbus of thinner whiter hair around the slender body gone stiff with rigor mortis. Without fully understanding what transfixes him, he stands there for a very long time—and then he continues on.