

Istamdale 3000

by

Soumyana

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Prologue

It was fun to have an attic for the first time. It was a place to get away from the police's sirens that always seemed to crawl into the main apartment. They got louder and louder and beat the pavement day and night, getting inlarkto all the cracks, under the doors, through the windows, echoing, echoing, echoing. What a relief. Almost no sounds were audible from up here; they were all muffled. Zia had great plans for her attic. From up here, she could also cross the terrace and have a good view of the road below.

“Wow, the perfect place for a spy,” exclaimed Zia. She stretched her ears. “But where are all those muffled sounds coming from? Are they coming from outside?” Zia walked to the glass door separating the attic from the parking terrace. “Nope,” she said with confidence, “not from outside.” She frowned.

Her roommate Maymoona ignored her. She was looking for something on the floor where they had pushed boxes of old stuff. “Which one does your sister want?” she said while stacking a few packages on top of each other.

“Nooria wants the green box over there,” said Zia indifferently.

“Then, get it,” advised Maymoona. “I can't reach from here.”

“Sure,” answered Zia reaching out meditatively. “You know, May, we've never explored the attic. I mean, how big is it?”

“I don't know. Does it matter?”

“Maybe,” announced Zia with increasing interest. “Let’s explore. Can we?” said Zia after tucking the green package under her arm.

“It’s probably not worth it, but why not.”

Zia switch her tunic to white light mode and the seams of her clothes lit up. The light wasn’t enough to show the whole room, but strong enough to suggest the attic did not end where the girls had imagined it would.

“That’s funny,” mused Zia walking forward deeper and deeper into the shadows. “This is bigger than I expected, much bigger! May, are all attics that long?”

Maymoona followed behind her friend with anticipation.

“Actually, it’s too big to be only the size of *our* condo.”

“Maybe we are sharing the attic with the neighbor. How long is her condo, May?”

“I don’t know.” She looked more carefully. Zia extended her hand straight ahead and a powerful beam of light surged from her hand for a few minutes. Maymoona looked with great interest and declared, “This surface looks big enough to contain the whole block!”

“What!” exclaimed Zia in disbelief.

“Is that our two doors down neighbor’s terrace with her sub on it?”

“Anne’s vehicle? No way!”

Maymoona examined the place carefully before declaring, “No wall, no barrier.”

Zia crunched and signaled her roommate to stop walking, “And that noise? It’s, hush, coming from someone’s condo, not from outside!”

“We are over our neighbor’s condo! I can’t believe it.”

Both girls listened carefully. The sound of News reached them. It said: *a new murder in the campus condos. There seems to be no suspect.*

“Let’s go back,” exclaimed Zia scared.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Zia?”

“What is it?”

“That means that anyone who lives in this block can go to our apartment without being heard or seen.”

“No!” Exclaimed Zia in fright. “Oh, I’m so going to get a high tech lock on our attic’s door.” Zia slunk backwards into the shadows towards her own apartment. If she wasn’t nervous before, she was now.

Maymoona stared thoughtfully at the dark that went on and on. A smile slowly stretched on her face. Yes, a fingerprint door lock was an excellent idea.

Unexpected Visitor

Six months later.

Zia was completely focused in her workout when, suddenly, a loud knock landed on her door. She shrieked in surprise. *Oh! Probably the landlady, maintenance or the courier,* she thought. She usually would not have bothered, but for good measure, she clicked the peephole to expand it. A man was framed in the door almost blocking it completely. She suddenly felt naked even though he could not see her. He felt so close, so... huge.

“Blast!” she exclaimed in disbelief.

Gazillion ideas jumped at her. She retreated from the door, trying to make as little noise as possible, and went to hide in the bathroom in case someone would look through her windows. There, on the other side of the door stood a man! She was not used to see strange men. Actually, in her little town, the woman-man ratio was overwhelmingly disproportionate. Twenty females were regularly born for one male. Blame it on the wars, blame it on the chemical pollution. Still, a man knocking at her door did not sound normal at all.

So there, on the other side of the door stood a man with a beard and a turban. *Is he Sikh?* She wondered. *Hindu or something? Maybe he has lost his way and he does not know how to access the street digital maps. Aren't Sikhs supposed to wear a dagger at all times? Is he preaching?* Wait a moment, *Zia Abu,* she said to herself, *are you profiling?*

A big bang made her jump out of her skin. She shivered in horror, connecting the noise next door to the male apparition. She gasped. *Oh, no! A new neighbor! O my God! Keep me safe!*

She called her best friend right away and explained everything. She finally concluded,

“May?! What shall I do? Don’t Hindus hate Muslims?”

“Let me see,” answered Maymoona on the other side of the line. “Judging by your reaction, isn’t that the other way around?”

“Funny!” answered Zia.

“Calm down, girl! Shut your blinds and for Allah's sake, don’t open the door to anyone! I’m coming home.”

Soon, Zia heard a rap at the outside wall of her apartment on the opposite side of the front door. Zia’s studio, like most houses, had revolving walls that could be rearranged at will from inside. She sighed in relief. She cracked the wall open to see who that was, thinking it was her roommate.

“Shh!” and “Zia!” whispered her two door-down Christian neighbor and classmate while she gave it a crack. “Are you in?”

Shoot! Anne, or should I say Ms. Bummer! Zia heaved, exasperated. Always at the right moment.

She grabbed a tunic and a head cover, and then she quickly opened the wall for them. Anne was with her girlfriend and she was trying to hush her while talking to Zia. They looked behind them as they talked.

“Did you see the neighbors?” said Anne as if she was scheming. Zia was not going to get into her pranks; that was for sure. She answered cautiously,

“Sort of...” She did not want to admit that she was frightened. Anne always came up with uncanny suggestions for a given problem, but Zia was not in the mood to hear her ideas at the moment.

Anne moved her eyes back and forth, from the outside to Zia’s face while saying, “I think

they are Muslims or something.”

“Muslims? No, not Muslims,” Zia jolted surprised. “What makes you say that?”

“Well. The girl. She has this thing over her head...” implied Anne touching the sides of her head. Zia did not agree. The appearances told her the contrary.

“Did you talk to them?” she asked, doubtful.

“No, but I’m pretty sure.” Said Anne with confidence and she was particularly stubborn.

“I think they are Sikh,” Zia protested, meaning, *Come on, I should know, I AM MUSLIM.* But, she still thought hiding it was best to keep a low profile. There were lots of ignorant people around the area. And Anne was one of them. She was not even sure why the town was still called Islamdale. It sounded like an oxymoron. Of course, Anne had no clue.

“Really? Sick?” Her classmate pondered aloud, “hmmm...,” and then added, “Yeah sure. They’re probably sick; they look congested to me. Listen, we just passed them. I smiled at the mother and the little girl and she just scowled and pushed her daughter behind her as though my smile alone would harm her child. Yeah, so I stopped smiling at them. I try to give everyone I meet respect, but if it’s spat back in my face, don’t think I’m going to give you another chance of politeness.”

The girlfriend protested in agreement, “One thing is for sure, I’ll never trust any of them enough to turn my back on them. Islam, you know... their religion, mandates that I am converted or killed. I wish they wouldn’t crawl all over this town.”

Zia’s mouth started to quiver in anger. Anne changed girlfriends like she changed clothes, never one better than the other. She was just going to reply when Maymoona entered holding a few computer keys in her hand. Her pregnancy was showing more and more but she could still hide it under baggy clothes. She was six months pregnant now. *Thank goodness, May,*

thought Zia worried. *If Anne knew that we were Muslims, we'd have to answer so many questions, we'd be here until tomorrow.*

Maymoona said, her voice full of sarcasm, "Your kindness was out of context. She can't teach her children to hate you and want you dead or converted with you smiling and stuff. You were completely off base... I saw you. You should be ashamed of yourself..." She clapped her tongue in disapproval. "Besides I'm pretty sure she is not Muslim. We can see half her hair and her belly button." She winked at Zia because of her bandana that clearly could not pass for a conventional *hijab*.

"Okay, people," answered Zia relieved to see her roommate. "Did you only come to see us to talk about our neighbors?"

"Yep," confirmed Anne. "My neighbors too, remember? Time to flip back home. See ya at the High, gals. First exam is tomorrow; hope you're ready, May."

Maymoona nodded.

"And you, Zia?" asked Anne looking like she was dying to find out the answer to the scoop of the year. "Where are you taking your exam?"

"Dad's lab."

"Wow! Mister Abu's lab! You're so lucky. I wish I could take all my exams at my dad's. I tried; I'm not even close."

"I guess you'll have to get yourself in the counseling field."

"O, well, I guess it's too late," said Anne disgusted.

Zia tried to change subject. "Do you have your lessons implanted in your brain?"

"Yeah. All set."

"Then, good luck," said the girls waving good bye to Anne and her girlfriend.

Anne was always the first one to try new technologies. She liked all the new gadgets.

“I sure am glad this rain is over,” added their classmate before rushing out her sweetheart.

“Keep dry!” said Zia.

Zia and Maymoona looked at each other.

“Yuck!” chuckled Maymoona with a smirk on her face. “How do these gals live with themselves? Memory implantation? For crying out loud!”

“Thank you rote memorization!” followed Zia with her arms extended wide toward the ceiling.

They were glad they were able to get rid of them so easily; it was time for prayer, not time for social calls. They had to wash up before *salah*.

Zia sighed, a little bit depressed, “I wish there was a way to tell the world we are Muslims so we did not have to hide it all the time.”

Maymoona looked at her in surprise. “Put a proper *hijab* on,” she added matter of factly. “Not this... this thing you call *hijab*-bandana fashionanza.” She smiled wittedly before adding, “And for good measure put on a *niqab* or two, the face veil would do justice to your enticing, mysterious, ninja eyes, and throw in a few prayer beads and a beard!”

“Next time I need advice, May, remind me not to ask you.”

“Done deal,” answered her friend with a nod.

UFO Sign

Zia looked around through the walls of her house before stepping outside. She draped her bandana *hijab* around her head, and smoothed her two-piece light pink tunic. The last she wanted was to run into the new neighbors. Today was the beginning of the week, and she had to go to school to check in for the lab. Zia had forgotten her slim tablet in her car. She had to go get it before commuting with her roommate Maymoona.

She looked around her neighborhood and made a mental image of the people living around. There was the new Sikh in the condo attached to their house. How could she forget that? *They get weirder and weirder every year*, she thought, remembering all the tenants that had lived next door. Some stayed only a few months while others were ejected from the condo after only a few weeks. Would this one last longer? She hoped not. But then, she may be prejudiced. She suddenly remembered with shame how people had always treated her mom because she looked foreign and her skin was a few degrees darker than her dad's. She couldn't blame her neighbor for being what he was, no matter how scared she was.

I hope this neighbor will be all right, she pleaded, raising her hands toward the sky.
Please, God, please!

She looked to her left. *Good, no one in view*, she thought with relief. Anne and her "friend" lived two doors down. They were okay, but she was not too fond of them. There was also a couple of girls around but they were always at each other's throats and Zia avoided them like fleas. And across the street lived Mrs. Stalk. Ah, Mrs. Stalk! The only mention of her neighbor across the street made her shiver. The lady hated their guts. She was maybe the only person in the area who knew the girls were Muslims. Zia had made friends with her the first day

she had moved in, and they had spent some time together talking about faith until Mrs. Stalk mentioned she was talking to spirits. Now, Muslims did not really embrace this belief, so it just sounded too creepy. Now that Zia knew, she saw the lady's feline sort of profile and the light in her eyes that had nothing close to reassuring. Despite her mistrust of the woman, Zia recognized that Mrs. Stalk had one good side: she did all those things that cracked Zia and Maymoona up.

So, Maymoona, her roommate, had placed her Subair on top of the house after Mrs. Stalk had parked her own vehicle in their ground level parking space. Zia walked around the car to get to hers and sighed heavily. *What nerve*, she said to herself as she did every day, but she preferred to stay well away from the lady now that she knew so much about her. She heard Maymoona use her remote to start the vehicle upstairs. She hurried to pick up her school gear, and then she took the elevator that led to the attic. The girls did not really like the terrace because nobody cleaned up there and it looked messy, but they had recently planned to hire a cleaning robot company to do the job, and they did an acceptable job. It was unthinkable a person would do any cleaning job nowadays; it was too time consuming. Cleaning robots were cheap, and days passed too quickly.

To get to the terrace, Zia had to cross the attic. In the attic, stacks of boxes lay down against the walls, things they did not need anymore, things they had forgotten to unwrap, and stuff Nooria, Zia's sister, had given them for safe keeping. She sighed. One day, they would have to get on their hands and knees and put away all this junk. Better soon than never. Usually, she did not pay attention to the things and jumped on the terrace by the glass door, but the need for this passage had recently increased exponentially with the little trick from Mrs. Stalk. At least here they were safe from their nutty "homebody" neighbors. No need to pass by them, not even feign any conversation.

What a wacko zone! Zia thought painfully thinking about the block located at the campus' edge.

Despite all her misery, Zia still kept her vehicle parked in front of the condo because then she did not have to cross the attic. She was afraid of every creepy crawly thing, and would stumble over what laid on the floor anyway. Thankfully she could commute with her roommate most of the time.

Today's situation requires a 911 plan, she thought, thinking of moving her Subair, too. The streets have become really dangerous, but the worst is that there is no street in the whole city that can claim peace. That's too bad.

“For Heavens’ sake, May!” exclaimed Zia aloud. “Islamdale used to be our town, the Muslim town!”

“True!” replied Maymoona, passing her big belly through the glass door. “It would still be ours if, for example, we had built huge walls around it, and we would have declared Islamdale a neutral country, the only country left in the whole world, or if so many people did not become Muslims all at once.”

“After a few centuries of existence, this little Islamdale town is just a shaggy shadow of what it used to be. Shame on us for ruining the dream. I wish there was something that could revive the past glory of the city.”

“Hmm, let’s see,” said Maymoona tentatively. “There is this spiritual gymnasium that is being built a few blocks away where your dad works.”

“Really? I did not notice.”

Maymoona waved her hands in the air, shaking her head, “Oh no. What am I suggesting? It’s just a bunch of Sufis.”

“So?”

“You are not prejudiced, girl, are you?” asked Maymoona inquisitively. “I can see your dad’s head the last time you mentioned the order.”

“Okay, so, I found them pretty nice once. I did not change my beliefs on this account.”

Maymoona winked. “Anyway, I have something that will please your dad. I heard of a new Sunni *Imam* who is supposed to give a few lectures this month in the new gymnasium.”

Zia jumped up. “I’m hooked!”

“People say he is quite good. Maybe he is worth checking out. Do not get your hopes too high, though.”

“Why?”

“He is married.”

“So?” exclaimed Zia in surprise. “I’m not planning on marrying him.”

“Yeah, but, these Sufi girls will be all over him. He’d better be a strong Muslim to resist the attraction.”

“Well, then,” declared Zia amused. “I am irresistible. I do not worship graves. I still believe I do not need a religious guide to tell me how to run my life. I do not believe there are esoteric hidden meanings in the Quran. I am free of blame. Totally Sunni.”

Maymoona laughed. “You’ll stand out. At least they are nice people.”

“Yeah, I like the love you all thing too. And they are open to other sects. I’ll blend in, you’ll see.” Zia added with a big grin, “You know what I like most in Sufism?”

Maymoona shook her head while raising her eyelashes way high.

Zia explained, “It’s generally more open to the leadership of women than orthodox Islam. There have been hundreds of female Sufi teachers and Saints. If I wanted to become Sufi, I’d love this most of all.”

“Here you go, girl. Future woman *Imam*,” joked Maymoona knowing that was a sore spot in the life of her friend.

Zia sulked. “Anyway, how is this place called? Do you know?”

“The TIMnasium, I think.”

“So, is it just a gymnasium?”

“Yeah, but not the ordinary Rec Center. It’s like... er... how would I say... a place to... yes, find this Shangri-La people have been dreaming of for generations.”

Zia walked up on the terrace, following her roommate. Maymoona beckoned at her from the railing.

“Look!” she said her eyes wide open.

Zia looked over the railing, focused a little bit and then tilted her head in deep meditation.

There, in front of them, on the lawn across theirs, laid the weirdest message she had ever seen. Mrs. Stalk had actually used her robot lawn mower to make a “UFO” sign in the front of her lawn. But that was yesterday. Today, she had added to it, “Land here!”

“Roll me in cookie crumbs!” exclaimed Zia, tears rolling in her eyes.

“She thinks that extra terrestrials are zooming in the neighborhood looking for her,” answered Maymoona cackling.

Zia shivered deep inside. *And what if that was true?* The presence of a UFO was more vivid in their century than in any other century. There was life on Mars after all. People talked about an extra terrestrial presence and a possibility of a war in the sky in a not so far away timeframe. They lived in a scary time. She wished she could live in the previous Millennium, or even better, that someone had invented a time machine that would back them up some ten years earlier when things were still fun no matter what they were.

Maymoona humored, still cachinnating, holding onto her rounded belly, “Tonight, we’ll send out Mister Trooper Robot to write on our side of the lawn, “Sorry, we missed. Need a bigger lawn.” Maybe that’ll make her move.”

Then, they heard the door to the next condo crack open.

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Zia, remotely opening the Subair’s door and pushing Maymoona hurriedly inside. The door zoomed shut. They both crumpled on the sofa with a loud sigh and a zip of merriment left in them. When Zia regained her calm, she realized that was from relief.

Zia’s heart contracted and she exploded, “O my God! I’m going to move out of here in a minute if we do not get some sane neighbors!”

They looked toward the door that still creaked and were relieved to notice it was only the wind.

Sufism is really the least of our problems, thought Zia while Maymoona jolted the directions into the vehicle's computer. *Between the mystics and the crackpots, I still prefer my people.*

Dad's Lab

Maymoona pushed the Subair's ceiling door up, and let Zia jump out of the vehicle.

"Have fun," she said. "I'll come get you later. Call me."

"No need to, May. I'll manage. Thanks."

"Okay. Bye."

Today, she had to check in her dad's lab for her exam. It was a pain. It's not that she hated exams. Exams felt like a special training in the new 3D environment. It was well worth the time spent. But she couldn't stand her dad's constant nurturing. It was suffocating.

Zia waved goodbye to her friend and breathed hard.

Maymoona pointed out the window to her right. Zia looked up in the same direction. The sky was gloomy as usual; it was rare to find a clear sky in the year 3000, really a treat, and clear skies only occurred in special places and not over the suburban area. She still perceived the towering profile of the TIMnasium. So, here it was.

She arrived at the lab. When she walked out in the heat, she could hear the construction of the new Rec Center going on to meet the deadline. She was not sure where the building was located exactly; she did not have a good sense of direction, but she could see it was near unless her impression was deceptive. The machines probably worked on their own most of the day and night now. There was little human supervision for the finishing touches like the decoration of the building, safety checks or the overall cleaning of the place. The whole interior was revamped virtually until the desired result. Interior furniture was pushed in and placed by robots after they

were remotely programmed. That was faster and cheaper and, most importantly, incident free. It was hard to see the details of the building from where she stood, and nobody was probably allowed in the periphery. She would wait until it opens to go visit. At least, she was aware of it. Would this new place change the lives of the people? She hoped that would be only for the best. She would hear about it from the news.

She went down to the basement, and then took the elevator to the sub-basement a few stories under water. Most buildings had their feet in the water to generate electricity from the friction and the pressure of the water. It was also useful for allowing under water parking spaces, minimizing pollution and traffic jams. It was also greatly aesthetic. She passed a group of female students studying the barnacles through the windows. Some were sketching while others were discussing the view with the automated teacher. Their stare looked evasive as if they were on high. Nobody was seeing her. They were all absorbed into their virtual world, out of this world, plugged in through visual devices.

She liked virtual reality like everybody else; it was part of their life, but she did not care too much for it. Some addicts really acted weird, like in... really weird. She automatically pictured her dad's lab assistant, Clark, and his clumsiness. Every time she saw him, he stumbled on something and had problem keeping his balance. Always plugged in, too. He looked like a moth in its dungeon. She shivered, contracting her shoulders and her fists and crossing her wrists in front of her as if to fend off the image. He was the one who inspired her to keep away from all this technology just by being himself. She chased the image from her head.

She entered the lab after the main login computer had logged her in and gave her permission. She felt right away invaded by the click-click of the computers and the high tech. The air smelled stale from lack of aeration.

She said half heartedly, “*Salam* Dad,” without looking. “I’m in for the counselor test. Is it ready?”

Zia’s dad poked his head from behind the wall where his office stood and said happily, “Go in, Sweetheart. I’ll be right there.”

She soon entered the lifeware environment, a computer program akin to a video game that dealt with real life situations. Her dad used it to form new students. The idea was to meet virtual clients and try to find practical solutions for them. Zia’s major was psychology. Becoming a counselor was the most logical step toward what would lead farther along the road to becoming a religious leader. But not before she was at the U. after High school. She wasn’t really registered in High school; she only took classes there that could not be replicated at home. Because she had skipped a few years of traditional school, her dad tried to give her a head start for the U. He was skilled in his area of expertise. She had to give him that. Zia and her dad did not really get along too well, but they did okay as long as their conversation stayed focused on the lessons... and polite.

While she strapped herself in the net of virtual reality, she looked at the wall behind which her dad and his assistant Clark worked. She wondered aloud,

“Hey, Dad! Do you happen to have any training lifeware for weird neighbor management?”

“I might,” he answered mysteriously, “but it’s not ready yet.”

Zia frowned, wondering what her dad’s new project was. She put on one gantlet, pulling at it slowly so that the sensors would stay in place.

“Well, let me know when it is.” She assured him, “I swear it’s getting worse even on the campus. That could be a life saver.”

Her dad came out of his office and approached her with interest. A strong line was crossing his forehead, and his wifisensor covered part of his hair. “Are you having any difficulty, Zia?”

“Oh, no... Gee, NO!” exclaimed Zia a little bit too enthusiastically. *Not yet*, she thought within herself.

He added mysteriously, “Actually, I have something better than behavior management.”

“Really? What is it?” asked Zia slightly turning to get the other gantlet.

“Home,” declared her dad putting his hands forward to pass her the helmet.

“Dad!” She shrugged, almost snatching the head sensor. “I’m too old now to stay home. I just got my apartment!”

He smiled while observing her.

She waited. After a moment, she asked with some hesitation, “So... Tell me the truth. What is your new toy?”

“Well...” He said, pulling at his beard that was exactly the dimension of his fist and curled over perfectly. “It is a historical simulator.”

That sounded amazing.

“Like... say... a time traveling device?”

Mister Abdu burst out laughing, “O, I don’t know if anyone can pull out this one yet.”

Zia looked disappointed. “So, how does it work, Dad?”

“Well...” he mused, tugging on the little patch of red hair. “In a nut shell, we can simulate life-like virtual historical figures and life-like places that do not exist anymore.”

“That’s it?” she said incredulous.

“Yes. And I’d like Nooria and you to be the first ones to try it.”

“Okay,” said Zia with a deep frown, not really convinced. She wondered how far her dad was in this project. She worried a little bit and wished she did not have to be her dad’s lab rat along with her sister Nooria.

She pulled at the harnesses to make sure they were holding her up before she asked with concern, “And who is in this with you?”

“Oh! No one, except for Clark, and brother Waqar.”

“Who is that?” said Zia in surprise.

“Brother Waqar? He is the new *imam* of the TIMasium Institute, the new gymnasium they are building outside.”

She looked perplexed. How did her dad meet him? Who was he? He was probably an old man if he was a friend of her dad. Was he the same person Maymoona had talked about earlier? How was he involved in her dad's research? That did not make sense. She had never heard of Brother Waqar. It was like he had suddenly popped into her life. A fleeting sense of hope caressed her with its wing. Was it destiny? Her dream was to meet a real *imam*. Maybe her dream finally came true. Maybe her dad made it happen.

“So... Dad. When do we get to meet him?”

“Who?” said her dad distracted by the sensors he was connecting from her helmet.

“You know... The Brother Waqar...”

“Simple, my little girl. You don't.”

Her mouth dropped. She felt indignant. She wished now she was closer to her dad. She would have to supplicate him now. No way she was going to do that. She would have to drop in the lab more often in the hope she would find him. The idea calmed her down. However, something was bothering her.

“And why exactly is that?” she asked cautiously.

Her dad looked at her for a moment and then continued hooking up the wires.

“I just think it is not appropriate. That's it.”

“Not appropriate?”

Zia felt outraged but swallowed her anger deep inside her. Her dad was the most conservative person on earth! He was always sheltering her. She decided to give her dad the cold

shoulder. Not appropriate? This guy was the most mysterious and the most exciting person she had ever heard of. He was the last scholar on earth for God's sake! He was all over town, but nobody had seen him yet. *Not appropriate!* She scoffed inwardly. *Is it like a man only thing or what? Two old men designing a mysterious piece of lifeware as if they were part of a secret society. So old fashioned!*

How did her dad get in touch with Waqar so fast anyway? Was her dad the one who invited him to Islamdale? She considered the possibility and concluded that her dad probably knew him from somewhere or someplace before. He traveled so much; nobody could keep up with what he was really doing. That was part of the reason Zia had a hard time getting along with him. And when he showed up, he was so oppressively overprotective of her.

“Right,” her dad answered plugging a few sensors to the machines.

She changed the subject and said confidently. “So, it is religion based.”

Her dad nodded assent.

“Any glitch?”

“No, not that I am aware of.”

“Pfeww! I am relieved to hear that.”

Neighbors' Tinkling

Zia took the subcab to go back home that night. She was happy but still fuming. She had done well on her test, but her dad was the strictest teacher she had ever had. She had to do better than that every time she went to the lab. She had to be better than anybody else. Bla, bla, bla. That was tiresome.

She misted herself with her portable humidifier; it was sweltering hot today. The greenhouse effect was suffocating; that made her even more upset. And this cab moved like a snail! She longed for the indoor air conditioning. That was a good thing the cab did not have any driver. She could see bumps of dirt in each corner of the vehicle. Her eyes got caught by a tiny insect crawling along the window edge. Disgusting! She was also tired and angry with her dad for treating her like a baby.

To top it all, the subcab landed among the most disturbing sight ever. What! Outside her condo, a group of men was lining up as if the neighbor's condo had been so overcrowded from the inside that people had to continue the party outside.

Maybe the whole Sikh community is out there, stretching over my lawn, thought Zia, her jaw hanging out. And it looks like they are only males! She tentatively walked towards her front door. That took courage, but a jumble of loud voices unwelcomed her with a whiff of body sweats. She quickly retreated. The front door was definitely not a good idea. She wished she could kick her way in. She looked from a distance. Interesting. The group had an incredible number of colorful figures. Some men wore turbans; others even wore daggers in their belts. Some wore robes. She smiled half-heartedly. What looked like guests were chattering in a babel of tongues. They did not really look very different from her community.

A pandemonium of dancing and whooping, drumming squatters suddenly emerging from

the guts of the house made her blood turn cold. She ran to the other side of her condo and scratched the wall in the hope that Maymoona would hear and have the good sense to crack a part of the wall to let her in. But no one answered. That was her luck! She could see that someone had brought a goat from a vehicle. She did not know what they were going to do with this animal, but she pushed her cell to call the police. She hesitated and then stopped. What would she tell them? There was no alcohol, no women. It was still early in the evening and she had not been assaulted. She then retracted. She wasn't about to cause any trouble. On one side, she would hate for her new neighbor to develop a grudge against her. That sounded like the most dangerous alternative ever. On the other side, she did not want her dad to find out she could not live alone. The new condo was a tryout. If she got into trouble, her dad would surely force her to go live back home with him, and that was the last thing she wanted right now.

She buzzed Maymoona instead. A few minutes later, the door cracked and Maymoona appeared from behind the wall.

“Pfeww! Thank God!” heaved Zia in relief.

“Peace be upon you, Zia,” Maymoona said cheerfully.

“Peace be upon you and Mia, too. How was your day?”

Maymoona caressed her protruding belly with love and care and declared happily, “Mia has been kicking all evening. Maybe she is jealous they are having the party of the century out there.”

Zia fleered, “I swear, they'd better cut it out early or I'll call the cops.”

“Hum, I think that's reasonable. After all, Mia and I need a little rest. Thank you for thinking of us.”

“You're welcome,” answered Zia dismissively.

Maymoona moved out of the way to let her roommate enter. A racket suddenly rose from behind her and she turned around with a jerk. “How long have they been feasting outside?” she asked her friend with worry.

“Oh, them? They just started. I wouldn’t mind being invited.”

“Good gracious, May! They are all men!” exclaimed Zia in shock.

Maymoona laughed whole-heartedly. She added, “You’re right. I just can’t figure that out. So many men!”

Zia ignored her. “Is there anything to eat?”

“Yeah, I called the caterers.”

Maymoona had purchased their frozen meals for the evening online, from the e-mart, so they did not have to worry about shopping. They were delivered instantly.

“Thank you, May. I appreciate that.”

“Have you prayed *Maghreb*?” she asked while Zia was punching her meal for the night from the slot machine. “You know how time is getting out of hand lately.”

“Time...” whispered Zia dreamily “...I wish I had more time. The whole world wishes they had more time...”

A dropping sound came from the upper part of the machine. Soon a three hundred fifty well-rounded calories’ meal slid into the oven.

“Hello!” insisted Maymoona. “Prayer!”

Zia answered, “Not yet!” while stretching to grab a handful of algae flavored pop corn.

Maymoona pushed her head out of the door to hear better, “What?”

“There are still a few minutes left...”

“What are you doing?”

Zia did not feel like explaining herself, so she said, “I’m busy.”

She installed herself before the 5-D screen.

Maymoona looked out the window to see if the sun had completely disappeared under the horizon, then rolled her eyes. She shrugged her shoulders and left to pray. Almost fifteen minutes passed while she finished her *salat* and made supplications. Gosh, the time for next prayer would come along soon. An hour and a half was consumed so fast! Maymoona felt very worried.

When she was done, she asked Zia again, “Did you pray yet, Zia?”

Zia pushed a big piece of her sandwich between her white teeth before answering with her mouth full, “I’m eating right now...”

Her roommate insisted, “Don’t you want to catch *Maghreb*? Tick, tock, clock.”

“What does Islam say about Islam and eating comes before praying?”

Her roommate shrugged and said, “Right!”, but Zia was not listening anymore; she was trying to follow her favorite program on the 5-D screen. Maymoona stared. Finally, Zia lifted her finger to signify she was unavailable and did not wish to be disturbed anymore. She really wanted to watch the program to the end. “Really, May, just one more minute; I’m going.” And she gestured with her pinky in the air: “Promise.”

The screen flashed a few ads, and then the speaker reappeared to conclude her talk.

The purpose is to be open to various means of feeling better, to understand that natural ways of achieving well-being have been used for many centuries and encouraged by Islam.

Some people never come close to what they do not understand, and for good reasons.

However, for those who tackle new ways of looking at life and our environment, the experience is

enlightening and is bound to make us grow.

An image of a magnificent gymnasium in the shape of a palm tree jumped on the 5-D screen.

This concludes our program from the Tree of Islamic Meditation (TIM).

Background drums enhanced the slogan: *“Want TIM? Be part of our team!”*

At the same time the program ended, Maymoona screamed out of dejection from the other room. Zia wondered what had happened. She stretched and told the 5-D screen to shut down:

“Off.”

The wall screen soon blended into a picture of the outside, giving the impression of a glass window while it was indeed a projection. It was dark outside.

Maymoona seemed to be talking to herself and getting more and more animated. Zia felt more and more restless. She wondered what was going on. She did not think it was because she did not pray yet; something else was going on. Praying was harder and harder on her. She did not know why. She looked at the picture of the outside. She felt the dwarf trees on the wall reflected her mood most often. She felt Zen inside, a quiet rumbling that wasn't peace; nobody felt peace anymore in the year 3000, but close enough to a feeling of peace. She shut her eyes while trying to take her mind elsewhere, to this forest the speaker was talking about. She imagined the scent of pines and the feel of the wind on her skin. She came closer to the wall fan and the indoors plants to set herself in the mood. No, she could not really imagine this for real. Nobody could. Nobody walked in the world's forests anymore. But there were those indoor gardens she visited

regularly that would do. She tried to remember them. She had been as far as her mind could go.

Her prayer garment lay on the sofa next to her. While she put it on, she sighed and looked towards her friend. Maymoona had stopped moving around, but she was still whispering to herself.

“Eh, bossy? Do you know this place?” asked Zia while putting on her knee length head cover.

Her roommate came out of her bedroom, a tiny phone plugged in her ear.

“Listen, Mom. Really! This is a bad time. Finals are a week from now. I need time to study. I can’t keep her with me!”

Zia waited patiently while the other girl gestured to her to wait a few more minutes. She continued after a pause,

“If’s are from Satan, Mom! Forget about him; he is out of our lives now. No, Mom. I do not have the faintest idea where to find him. Sure, Mom. *Salam*, Mom.”

She hung up, looking worried. Zia wanted to know what was going on badly, but she did not want to impose. Instead, she tried to look busy, licking crumbs off her fingers. She was surprised when her roommate asked, a little upset,

“What place?!”

Zia braced herself and answered as if she had not just preyed on someone else’s discussion.

“You know, the TIMnasium; it’s all over the news now.”

“Great. What do you want to know?” said Maymoona pacing around and holding onto her belly.

“Do you know how to get there, then?” asked Zia clapping her hands for her flying prayer carpet.

“Take the screen program; they’ll have it encrypted in there.”

“Thanks.”

“Er, Zia” hesitated Maymoona.

“Yeah?” answered Zia surprised.

”I need a huge favor from your sister. Do you think...?”

“Sure. I’ll call her tomorrow.”

“Thanks a bunch.”

Zia nodded. Maymoona returned to her bedroom. A favor? That was interesting. For a few more moments, Zia returned to the Zen state where it was good to forget that the world sucked so much, and then she shrugged it off.

She finally prayed and had problems keeping her concentration. Her mind flipped the ad images in front of her eyes while bowing. Maymoona’s words kept coming back too. She fought a little bit more to keep her concentration, until she turned her head right and left to end her prayer.

First Class

The next day, Zia woke up at the crack of dawn and took special pleasure to wake her roommate up for the *Fajr* prayer. That was a game they had established since they started praying when they moved in together. They had promised each other to be good Muslim friends and always tried to be on time for prayers.

“May?” peeped in Zia.

Maymoona grumbled. A few minutes later, she peeped in again.

“Maaayyyyy!” she said sing singing her friend’s name. “It’s six in the mornningggg!”

“All right,” said Maymoona turning in her sleep.

Zia crept in next to the girl’s bed and put a foot on the levitating bed, pushing it every which way and sending it flying across the room.

Maymoona raised her head suddenly, sleepy hair on top of her head, her growing belly bulging under the covers.

“What?” she said before the bed turned over and she stammered to her feet.

“He, he, he,” laughed Zia while running out of the room. “Having a bad “air” day today?” Maymoona’s bed disappeared with a puff, sucked in into the wall. At the same time, Zia made it to the bathroom. Today, she wanted to look good for her first day at the TIMnasium. These people were clever; they had opened the door of the TIM just for Summer break, drawing in the young crowd. She had spent some time researching the classes available. They were almost all full. Gosh, what class didn’t they think of? Relaxing Gliders, Indoor Levitation Hiking, Lazy River Swimming, Study and Dip, and much more. The prices were also very attractive. But the biggest attraction would certainly be Brother Waqar’s speech. She needed to look more than good in case she had an opportunity to meet him in person.

She made a point to dress conservative with large tube pants and a tunic that twirled elegantly around her thin body. She was thankful for the simplicity of modern fashion. Thank God, her wardrobe consisted of only a few garments that never got a stain on them and did not need to be washed. She could exercise without feeling humid from the perspiration. She never carried a bag; nobody needed extra baggage to go anywhere. If need be, she could always buy a new design on her way back from the gymnasium and discard the one she was wearing. Her underwear was also made of a resistant paper fabric that could be used only once. This way, modern 3000ers staid germ free and were able to stay away from rampant illnesses. All her clothes were highly recyclable and standard. Men and women mostly wore similar designs, differing in size, color and pattern, which made life easier while buying. However, today she needed a wide flare half way down her tunic to look a little bit more feminine than the usual. This way, she would make her statement.

Maymoona appeared at the door of the bathroom, looked Zia up and said sleepily, “You should add a badge saying SUNNI on it.” And she cracked a crooked smile.

“Funny, May.”

While her roommate got ready for her morning prayer beside her, she braided her hair, and let it hang on the back of her neck, her bandana *hijab* hiding just enough of her golden chestnut locks. She looked distinguished and modest at the same time. Perfect. She eyed towards Maymoona who was not bowing towards her rug and waved good bye.

She then cracked her door open, grinning at herself, and peeped out to make sure no one came out from the neighbor’s apartment; she did not want to be confronted by any early rising weirdo. Mrs. Stalk’s car was once again blocking the way. *This one*, she thought, *I wish she could be boxed and shipped to the end of the galaxy with a no return address.*

Zia crossed the street to get to her sub, crept into it and connected her GPS to the screen program where the address of the program she was watching the day before was prerecorded. Yippee! Good, it would be easier to get there without pulling up a map. Her roommate was right; it was in there, and it was the grand opening of the TIMnasium. Yes, Brother Waqar was supposed to make a speech today. The next class was in an hour. There was plenty of time for a little shop browsing. She headed towards the airborne mall.

Sometime later, the Subair pulled at the entrance of the TIMnasium. Zia slid onto the building's escalator before it went to park on its own. The girl opened her eyes wide. This place was amazing in terms of architecture. The building looked like a palm tree that extended way below the ground level to pick up sub riders coming from the sea. The interior column separated at one point to diverge. The branches formed arcades that ended into round rooms, reminders of date fruits.

On the main column it said *"The believer looks like a palm tree; he is straight and tall; he does not deviate."* Signed TIM, the Tree of Islamic Meditation.

Zia thought for a moment. *Hmm*, she did not know about that, never heard that phrase before. Was it from the Quran? Anyway, she lengthened her spine in order to feel as tall as she could. *Yes*, she thought, feeling a little guilty, *a Muslim should stand tall and proud. I agree. In fact, anybody should be able to do that.*

She accelerated the pace on the escalator to make sure to catch the class. She stopped on the first floor. There was a huge Japanese fountain trickling agreeably. She could see shapes through the cascade by transparency, people praying or listening to books on air. It was mostly silent. The permeating secrecy was only broken by trickling waters as it flowed down over layers of

sculpted permanent ice. Here and there she could see sisters and brothers in long colorful translucent tunics, the latest Muslim hip.

Is that a mosque in the back? She thought for a moment. It was hard to tell, but the door was made of a classic magnificent yet simple window. Qurans from different centuries, from parchment to plastic were encased there. *Something to check out later anyway*, she promised herself.

She looked around for signs, some directions, but did not care to lose more time. A cleaning robot quietly was roaming around the carbon fiber floor, dusting and polishing. She asked it the direction and was delivered a map of the building. Looking up the inscriptions over the rooms was easy; almost all buildings were laid out the same. After a few seconds, she found it: “Yoga - Miss Munira.”

She undid a magnetic pocket on her sleeve and slid her credit card into the slot to pay for the lesson. The front door slid automatically and she stepped inside. She was greeted by a discreet scent of lavender coming from a diffuser. She inhaled deeply and relaxed. The teacher had already begun the lesson. Zia was shocked. Where did the time go? Yes, her plasma clock matched the classroom’s clock! *But I had an hour to arrive*, she thought, puzzled. *Time is so unreliable nowadays*. She walked towards the buzzing sound of voices.

Miss Munira was a small lady with Asian features. Her hair was short and she may have been in her forties although it was harder and harder to tell with the new cosmetics that stretched the wrinkles, under garments that firmed the body and made older women look younger.

Zia removed her sandals. She hesitated, and then modestly said, “*Assalam Alaikum*,” hoping she would not really be heard but willing to be polite. Not that manners really mattered; most people did not care anyways. The closest woman smiled at her and her lips moved vaguely.

Zia smiled back, then she gracefully walked around the group and slid to the floor, pulling her digitized notebook from her sleeve to replay the class afterwards.

Miss Munira was saying, “Your lungs get more elastic by regular exercise. Most people do not get to exercise at all because our lives have become very sedentary. When we are inactive for a long stretch of time, we tend to breathe in a shallow way, using only the upper part of our bust. This often makes us feel tired, listless and anxious, sometimes even out of breath. In Yoga, we breathe with our belly; that’s the most complete breathing technique that exists. Poses in between inhaling and exhaling allow our chest to expand fully. So, when you feel tired, lethargic or below par, that’s the technique that can save your life.”

Sister Munira asked the class to lie down on the floor on thick mats that removed the sense of gravity, and then she directed, “Lie down comfortably on your back. Forget about all that is around you.”

Zia looked all around her, wondering if everybody really closed their eyes, or if the teacher looked at her.

Munira insisted, “Everybody close your eyes, and open your third eye. Now, nobody is watching you; you are yourself with yourself, within yourself, alone.”

Zia smiled. *In a way of speaking*, she thought to herself. There wasn’t anything like privacy in her century. She knew that the building had cameras in every room. She even wore a chip that controlled her vital levels and could warn the hospital or the police directly if she had a heart attack or something happened to her. Prevention was the high point of the century to avoid as many crimes as possible. *Maybe that is my third eye*, she thought while grinning to herself.

That lady who had smiled to her a few minutes earlier was lying almost next to her now. They exchanged a quick look and the other sister smiled briefly before closing her eyes.

She tried to get her concentration going. She tried to forget everything for a few seconds. Almost immediately, she felt assaulted by the speeding images of the previous week. The neighbor's party came first with the sound of his door slamming over and over again. Then, she saw her dad urging her to come live with him and she heard herself repeating "Dad... but, Dad!" Next, she remembered Mrs. Stalk giving her the dead look across the yard. Shilling! Finally, she saw images from the news invading her privacy while going to the public bathroom and she heard the words "war, crime, terror, illness" pelting her as she was walking in the street. Her heartbeat went faster and faster and her lungs seemed to become smaller, to crumble inside her. She opened her eyes wide and depressed the signal coming from her wrist that pulsed when she was in distress. Sister Munira, alerted, came over her head and pressed on her shoulders to make sure she was doing fine. A thin golden necklace caught a spark of light on the teacher's neck. From it dangled a small palm tree. Zia's eyes followed it upside down. It blended and described a circle of light above her. Zia smiled in response to Munira's pression and tried to concentrate once again, the golden jewel lingering in her mind, reassuring her.

Zia noted the next minutes were spent working on what was called *the alternate nostril technique* before her mind zoomed to another dimension. Almost against her will, she started recalling what she had seen in an advertisement on her way to the gym and pondered over the beauty of the image without recalling the message. She remembered to order the meal for tonight, mentally made a list of her favorite dishes. She tried to breathe deeply as directed but soon thought about a new pair of shoes she had seen in a catalogue. With an effort, she grabbed the present moment and counted until sixteen with the teacher, but she was not sure what it was all about anymore. She felt Zen again. She had liked the idea of the class on her 5-D screen, but practicing was not as easy as she had thought at first.

She tried to stop breathing for a few counts but gasped almost immediately. She panted. How hard could it be to work with one's body? She tried again without success. It seemed like her body was resisting her. She gave up. The body was this part of the modern century that was completely forgotten. As long as people made this body happy, nothing else mattered but the mind, what everybody did with their mind. People were switching appliances on and off with their minds, working on the computer with their mind, and even talking on the phone using their vocal cords, just thinking the words, not saying them. There was no use to speak much or to walk as there was no need to think about how to breathe. The body was sort of shut down. Thinking about it, she felt a little bit scared. Breathing used to be easy. Breathing was something nobody thought about anymore, and that's what attracted Zia to this class in the first place; she wanted to be able to breathe deeply again and not feel this weight on her chest. She wanted to relearn her body.

Teacher Munira continued talking while the students were doing their exercises. Some ladies looked at each other and looked away, shrugging their shoulders. Others tried forcefully to perform the task requested. For a few others, it seemed easy enough to follow.

Munira continued, undisturbed, encouraging, "The breath is a flow of energy. Do not force it. Let it come and go. Keep up the good work."

This sister went on and on, almost mechanically. Could sister Munira be the latest tech robot? Zia smiled at the joke. *Come on, girl, get serious*, she scolded herself.

She frowned while the sister added, "Tiredness occurs when we are blocking this energy. To clear its pathway, you can also rub your ear lobes or pull the toe adjacent to the big toe and rub it vigorously."

Thinking about robots, Zia wished she had taken her masseuse robot. She couldn't

concentrate on both, the words and the actions. Besides, her back hurt. Lying down like this made her back hurt because she was so tense.

She was going to give up and stand up when Miss Munira concluded, “Someone said: *‘The breath is the intelligence of the body’* You might want to think about it before we end this session.”

She smiled gently, saluted her students and retired to another corner of the room, checking the number of registrations and the number of people in the room on the building’s touch screen computer. What a relief!

Zia was surprised something that sounded so profound had been thrown out at the end of a class. *Food for the mind, hmm. Thank you sister.* She was very impressed by the words. They went way over her head, but they touched down on her flourishing mind. These words would stay in her mind for days, weeks, years and would come back on a regular basis to quench her desire for depth. They sounded so surreal, so detached from her reality...

She slowly stretched as she came back from her relaxation. She disliked the end of any class when the tension stopped and everybody was taking her life back where she had left it. It felt like coming back to earth with a fall. She looked around. The smiling sister had disappeared. Good! She did not really feel like talking right now.

She felt a tap on her shoulder, “*Assalam alaikum.*”

There she was! Zia closed her eyes in dejection. Her feelings surged at her: angry, embarrassed, and then determined.

“And peace be upon you too,” she replied shyly to the greeting, not sure what to do with her legs and arms. She then nervously straightened her tunic.

“You’re new to Yoga?” asked the woman with a warm smile. She was much older than

Zia, probably in her thirties. She looked like one of these people that spent their time in Yoga classes: svelte, bold, smiling.

“Yeah,” replied Zia.

“You’ll get used to sister Munira. She’s different.”

“I bet.”

“There’s a lecture in the mosque afterwards. Want to join?”

Of course, she was talking about Brother Waqar’s talk. She was excited. Zia’s heart jumped in her chest.

“*Insha Allah*. God willing. What’s the subject?”

The smiling lady explained with a wink, “The end of the world.”

Zia smiled back with a grunt. *Wow! That’s a tough subject.*

“See you,” said the lady.

“Okay.”

She turned around, touched a button at her throat that activated her phone and mentally dialed her sister’s phone number.

“Hi, sis! Are you at home yet? I need to talk to you.” Nooria answered the phone. “I’m still at work. Almost done. What’s up?”

“Nothing, just wanted to get in touch.”

“Okay, Zia, where did you go today? I see that you are in the East part of town. Did you go see Dad?”

“Well, no.”

“So, where are you?”

“At the TIMnasium” confessed Zia with a tinge of excitement in her voice.

“I didn’t know they were opened.”

“Yeah, just today. Listen to this, Nooria. The breathe is the intelligence. I just learned that today.”

“Isn’t that some Sufi, mystic stuff?”

“Maybe...,” hesitated Zia. ”I’m not Sufi, but I like the idea. Anybody can relate to it. Can’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Isn’t that like training to concentrate in prayer?”

“Concentrating during prayer? Maybe...”

“Imagine how important breathing is, Nooria!” insisted Zia with passion. “When we walk up stairs, or when we exert ourselves, breathing surely helps us going, doesn’t it? Being out of breath stops us from going further, right? So, breathing is a must. The same is true for prayers.”

“The breath is the brain!”

“Precisely, Nooria! That’s what our teacher told us today! How did you come up with that?”

“Er, this is not for nothing that the word ‘inspiration’ in English means both ‘meditating’ and ‘breathing in’. Hello! I’m a nurse; I should know a few things about that. People who have best quality of life and energy are those who can breathe longer and deeper.”

“Really, sis; you should teach a class! I had no idea you knew all that stuff.”

“Dad’s computer program.”

“How come, Nooria?”

“See, we measure someone’s level of fitness by measuring how much intake of air their lungs can hold and subtract by how much in inches their lungs can deflate. Nursing course, 101.

You should try it sometime.”

“Yeah, Dad mentioned it. I hadn’t been in Dad’s lab for ages, but he invited me last week, so I went. He tested me. I might try one of the ER programs one day.”

“You finally went to the lab? Good for you, sis! I’m sure you did great on the test too.”

“Thanks. Er... There is something I wanted to talk to you about, Nooria.”

“Sure.”

“Well, May has something very special to ask you if you do not mind. It’s like a favor. I cannot explain on the phone. She will when she sees you.”

“How mysterious!”

“I don’t even know myself what it is. I kind of guessed, but...”

“Okay then.”

“Well... Er... Can we come visit sometime tomorrow? Please... I can’t wait to hear what it is all the secrecy about.”

“Sure, I’m off for the weekend. You’re very welcome.”

“Yeah! What time?”

“You choose, Zia.”

“Okay, as usual then.”

“Cool.”

“Great! Thanks, sis.”

“You’re welcome. *Salam.*”

“*Wa alaikum assalam*, Nooria. Sleep tight.”

Zia unplugged herself. She missed living with her sister since Nooria got married. Also, she took more and more night shifts and would sleep during part of the day. It was really hard to

get in touch with her. Zia wondered what was causing her sister to change her schedule. She certainly did not need more cash. *So what? Well, none of my beeswax*, Zia scolded herself, *Nooria is a grown woman now.*

Waqar's Lecture

Zia gathered her legs behind her back gracefully and slowly retied her scarf. She wished everybody had left and she did not have to talk to anyone. But she was back on earth and the real world felt like it was jumping back at her.

She felt very self-conscious. She did the best she could to appear dignified and smooth in her movements, but she felt very clumsy inside. She tried to avoid the other women's eyes from the Yoga class while leaving but quickly found out some were smiling at her or gazing with curiosity. Three girls about her age were flipping designs of virtual actors on their tunics and giggled madly while remotely adding butterfly wings around the images. Two other girls were trying out the suspended Yoga nets for the no gravity Yoga class. Zia tried not to stare. Shoot! A teen was coming towards her. She stood out of the group. She did not have anything special about her, but she did look at her when she was trying Munira's poses and that made her uncomfortable. She smiled at Zia, and Zia tried to smile back. She put her hand on Zia's arm and caressed it slightly.

“What's your name, dear?”

Zia felt ill at ease by the attention. Her gesture was a little bit too intimate for her. Was this just a friendly gesture or did it mean something else? There were so many cultures represented in Islamdale, it was hard to tell what was cultural and innocent and what was personal, worth worrying about.

She stammered, “Er... I'm sister Zia.”

The lady caught her and answered with a sweetened voice, “You're lucky to be so cute. Many women wished they could look like you, I'm sure. It's not like there are many men around anymore.”

Zia did not know what to answer. It sounded spooky. She tried to look unaffected by the sister's words and grimaced back.

The sister insisted, "Are you going to the mosque to listen to Brother Waqar's lecture? You'll see; he is really good... and cute too."

"I guess I'm interested," replied Zia hardly containing her excitement at the idea of meeting the great man. "I mean... I'm not interested in him, as a man. I mean... you know what I mean..."

"Good for you. You should definitely come," said the teen amused. And she passed her finger along Zia's chin and winked at her still smiling.

Hey lady, off limit here! Zia exclaimed inwardly, but instead of saying it aloud, she looked at her feet, and tried to find a quick way to escape. Gosh, there wasn't anything that came to mind. *Come on, Zia*, she scolded herself. Miss Munira was approaching them. Zia did not wait for any more hints. She excused herself and walked away as fast as she could. With all the women around, in fact too many women around, and so few men, Muslim gay societies had acquired a new life of their own. *Shame on us*, thought Zia disgusted. *That's certainly not what we were created for.* Zia was appalled about the new interpretations people made of her religion. Gayism was not in the dark anymore. *Shame on you!* She thought thinking of the teen. She dreaded these encounters. It was nothing but shocking, and she wished women would just be willing to become co-wives. She wished men would be more willing too. It was not rare to hear the story of a man being coerced to marry a second time. It was pitiful. At the same time, she could not blame men. Females were weird. As far as she was concerned, she did not care for a man; she left the whole sex to other women. She preferred her freedom unless the man was really worth following. *Not someone like Dad! God forbid.* She shook her head at the idea. *Always*

watching and criticizing. As it comes to it, there are the sensorwares to replace them. Zia chased these ideas away from her head as quickly as they had come. She would just have to stay away from this sister for a while.

The Lecture

Going to the mosque was easy; it was located a floor below the Yoga class, and she had passed it already on her way to her session. Besides, she could see that many people were converging towards it. She just followed the visitors and took a seat in the back of the auditorium-mosque. It was very crowded, and her hope to meet the scholar vanished gradually as she looked at the people trickling in and out of the mosque. There would be other occasions, she reasoned. She was sure of it, especially with her dad around. Well, maybe not with her dad around unless she was ready to surprise him. *Would that require a lot of spying?* she thought. Probably. Nay, she wasn't up to it. Plus, it was really wrong to spy. Very wrong. Not to mention if she was caught.

A mixture of perfumes extracted her from her reverie. She looked around, gasping as people made way to let her in. The new mosque was breathtaking. It was laid out differently from the traditional places of worship. In order to allow everyone to see the *imam* leading the prayer, the ranks were built around the room, one rank higher than the other as in an amphitheatre. This also allowed Muslims to pray on the same line, guessed Zia. It was well known that modern architecture tried to remedy people's ignorance. That was an amazing and a revolutionary concept. Zia had long since stopped praying in a mosque because she knew that if other worshippers did not pray in a straight line, her own prayer would not be acceptable. There was no point to go to the mosque in this account. Maybe she would now be reconciled with the place. She liked big crowds; she felt secure in them. Here, she was unknown, untroubled, safely hidden.

The mosque was so full; Zia could only see the backs of people now, mostly women. She stood up to avoid being trampled over. And since there was no way to secure her place, people

were slowly shifting her backward. It was a nightmare. Zia was finally crushed between two seats like a flower between a sprout of weeds. She froze. The invited professor, Brother Waqar, had already started his lecture. He was making a list of the signs of the end of the world. She strained to listen and could only hear his voice, strong and charismatic, truly compelling. His voice kept her afloat, stretching her attention against the constant mutterings, wanting to know more. And suddenly, she was so tuned up to him, she could not hear the voices around anymore, only his, and his message became clear and compelling like the buzz of the humming bird slowly coming at her. It was at first a gentle murmur, and then his voice grew bigger and stronger.

He explained, "Some of the signs of the end of the world have already happened, and some other signs are happening right now. I do not think we are near the end; only minor signs are visible nowadays. Does it mean that you should feel relieved? Don't! It means you should be vigilant; we should all be on our guard. The signs of the end of the world may be just minor, but they add up to our pile of sins like kindle adds up to a bonfire. They are slowly invading every family, every life, every heart. Soon, no one will hear the call from Allah anymore. Yes, we try to be good people. We think we do not lie. We think we do not cheat, but in reality we do all those things... every day of our lives. We think lies are white lies. We think if we do not bend the rules, we will be looked upon as crazy. These are not the most obvious signs. People not going to the mosque anymore, *hijab* fashion involving a bump on top of women's head, men dressing like women, and music devices everywhere are some of these other few signs of the end. What's wrong with that? It means you forgot the law to follow your desires. Morals without God's laws are like quick sand laws, instable, movable. They start disappearing whenever it gets too hard."

Zia looked up and around and could definitely be a witness of what was just said. From

her position, she had a hard time telling who was male and who was female. The head covering had mostly disappeared or was worn as a sign of fashion, and men wore long hair in buns or ponytails. It looked clean and Zia rather liked it, but she shivered remembering these were signs of the end of time. She also could not imagine living without music. *What is so wrong with music?* She pondered. *That kind of blows my mind.* She could remember all the curative effects of music and the fact it was used in all therapies she could think of. *Maybe it is because all the musicians I can think of are drug addicts...* But she did not have time to think further; the *imam* was talking again.

“What worries me is that we are all too busy to see the signs. Our buildings are not designed for socialization. Architecture does not include a landscape and respect for our environment. We are going more and more for beautifully huge structures where our heart has no place. Yes, we build buildings higher and higher, underwater luxury hotels, farms suspended over the city, rotating skyscrapers. Our technology is very impressive. We, as a nation, have felt the need to abandon our cookie-cutter-plywood-and-plastic inefficient suburbia homes and decided to live in much more compact and energy efficient cities. We are feeling very comfortable. Look at our floating ecopolis. Very impressive, aren't they?”

He paused. Everybody was intently listening, absorbing his words, waiting for more. Zia wondered where this was going to lead to. He cleared his voice and started again calmly, “But our Islam has become worn out like clothes are, until no one will know what fasting, prayer, charity and rituals are.”

People suddenly contested aloud, disagreeing with him.

He pursued, “Yes!” and he added, a little higher and louder, “YES!”

People stopped talking to pay attention.

“Why is it so hard to tell the truth but yet so easy to tell a lie? Why are we so sleepy in mosque, but right when the prayer is over, we suddenly wake up, ready for fun? Why is it so hard to talk about Allah but yet so easy to backbite? Why is it so boring to listen to an Islamic story, but yet so easy to look at all the others? Why is it so easy to delete Godly messages, but yet we forward all of the funny ones? Think about it.”

And the lecture was over. Zia heard someone complain, “That was a long speech!”

Another woman watched the time and exclaimed, “Gosh, I still need to go shopping.”

People were already leaving and many were already depressing their phones. It was not an option to talk to anyone around. People received hodge podge messages constantly, from brief ads cutting up their phone calls or image mails suddenly jumping at them. They were disconnected. Zia saw her view of the mosque clear up as people rushed out. The *imam* was apparently still there, but she was not able to tell who it was. Many women had formed a wall between her and Waqar. Despite the barrier, she felt connected to him. She understood him. She was attuned to him. Zia liked the brief and profound message coming from him. She promised to come back and listen for more. *Yes, why are the buildings better and better but our hearts darker and darker?* She thought sorely. *Maybe the infrastructures just forces people into being asocial and selfish?* That was a good question. A crucial question. She had to learn more about her religion and understand it better if she wanted to attract the hearts of people to it and become an *imam* herself. Would knowing more about Islam be enough? She wondered. She sensed that Brother Waqar could be part of the answer. *Maybe if people can relax more,* she thought while leaving the building, *then maybe they could finally open their heart and listen to God.*

It made sense. Anyways, it was worth a try.

Gathering Samples

Phil shrugged in frustration. Nooria was a wonderful person, but, at times, yes, at times... just like now... she could be exasperating.

“Nooria, I don’t feel guilty. Really! Why should I? This is the will of God, not mine!”

Nooria pulled herself up on the couch. She was resting on his chest, and tears still lingered at the brim of her eyes. He looked back at her with a deep frown.

She said, “You know, we don’t have to do this if you do not want it anymore. Honestly. I’m okay with that.”

He sat straight and started packing the sperm samples. Nooria helped him pack the little tubes inside the protective box, and their hands touched. They instantly felt the electricity static shock. It felt almost uncomfortable, as if the tension was localized on the skin. She picked up her fingers quickly. He did not bulge but put the lid on top of the tubes. He thought nervously, *I fail her, and she is alright with that!? If this is what she really wants; maybe it is worth it.* Phil smiled at Nooria and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. Phil stood to pick up the container.

The air was pregnant. She smiled at the words that cascaded from her mind; even their vocabulary had changed. At a loss for words, she looked thoughtfully at the samples Phil was packing in a special pouch, and then smiled at him, pointing vaguely,

“Do you think there are 20 million in here... at least?”

“Better be...”

“More than the world’s population...”

Phil shrugged and then pulled her toward him gently. “You know, Zia... Leave all this to God. Will you, darling?”

Zia looked down, a little embarrassed, “If we really did leave everything to God, you would not be on your way to the hospital to deliver your sperm kit, would you?”

He stiffened. Then, he said, “God has not created any disease but He has also created a cure for it. That’s the wisdom of Islam. We’ll pull through this, I promise.” He smiled again, more confident.

“Yes, it is up to us to find the cure...” she replied sulkily. “That’ the wisdom of Islam.”

Phil moved towards the front door. *It is so exasperating!* He thought. *I sure feel like less of a man today because of this whole thing. Why does it feel that way? I guess Paradise is at the feet of the patient one.*

He added in a lighter tone, “Er, if we cannot find this cure, you know... Let’s face it; do you love me for ME or for my sperm?” That was not a question.

She managed to laugh through a pain that grabbed at the sides of her head, a very sharp sting.

He added confidently, “Hold on! If we are willing to do anything, then there is a process that they go in and take a small piece of the testicle about the size of a dime and extract hidden sperms from. There’s gotta be something there, I mean come on now.” And he thought within himself, *Just extremely right now.*

In fact, he was not sure trying to conceive was a great idea. He was rather pleased that Nooria was barren. *If only she could stay that way,* he pleaded inwardly. *Why put another female on Earth? The odds to have a baby boy are one over twenty!* He shrugged, trying to forget that being a male in the year 3000 sounded like a curse.

She passed her fingers over his brows to soften them, and then replied, “For all I know, maybe there is nothing wrong with you either. All I can say is, I understand how you feel right

now... the whole "shot in the chest feeling." It takes your breath away and all I can say is, even though it looks like your options are very limited... where there is a will, **THERE IS A WAY!**"

Phil did not have time to answer. The front door buzzed. He sighed in relief. Maybe that was better this way.

A Bear Without Face

Nooria answered the intercom.

Her sister Zia was talking on the other end. “Hey, Nooria!” joked Zia excitedly. “What’s happenin’? Turn it up DJ, turn it up!” She laughed.

“Okay,” answered Nooria half-amused. “What’s happenin’, sis?”

Nooria sighed. She tried to sound cheerful, but within her, a little voice almost screamed to her, *I wish I could say I am totally shell-shocked. Let’s talk tomorrow.* But, of course, she would not. Zia was her sister and, as a rule, she never turned her down. Besides, it was the only day of the week they would be able to see each other. There weren’t many occasions to meet and have a chat these days. She did not want to pass this up.

Zia exclaimed a little disappointed, “What?! I guess you have already forgotten why we’re coming over?”

“Right... right. Is May with you?”

“She sure is.”

“Okay, come up, girls.”

She turned around toward her husband and rolled her back on the door.

A minute later, Zia rapped at the door, saying with a diminished confidence, “Hey! We’re at the door now. Would you mind opening up?”

Nooria raked her mind to try to find an excuse not to receive them. She could not find one.

“Come on, Nooria, open up! It’s freezing out here. We got snow this morning.”

“Er, I’m not dressed. Would you mind waiting until I put something on?”

Zia was silent for a long moment. Nooria felt suddenly embarrassed. She did not want her

husband to be home when they visited, but she did not know how to tell him to go. Besides, time was turning into gold for the samples. Fortunately, he took the hint, sighed and put on his jacket.

He was ready to go.

Nooria talked in the intercom, "Okay now. Hey, Shishie? All clear."

Nooria tapped her head slightly on the door before turning to face Phil.

"You'd better dress," he said casually.

She nodded. She buzzed the intercom, and the door opened. Phil said bye and was on his way out.

Nooria put a dress quickly on.

"*Salam*, Shishies," he said while passing the two young girls and winking at them. They looked down quickly.

Zia exclaimed, "Gosh, your hubby is still so awesome. You're so lucky."

"Too bad Muslim men can't marry two sisters," joked Maymoona.

"Er... I was just telling the truth, not proposing to him!" replied Zia non-appreciative.

She hugged her sister, putting all of her heart into it, really feeling relieved she had finally let them come in. She did not want to have to go back home and come back again. It was too far and way too cold outside.

Nooria apologized, "I'm sorry, Zia, Phil just took a long time getting ready. I did not want you being stuck with him inside."

Zia replied with her teeth shattering, "Let it be, sis."

Maymoona chimed in, "Don't take life too seriously. You'll never escape it alive anyways."

Nooria now hugged Maymoona and declared, "I'm glad to see you, May."

Maymoona nodded, smiling.

“How is Mia?”

Maymoona took Nooria’s hand and pressed it against her belly. Nooria felt a bulge that brought a wave of emotions across her chest.

“Awesome,” admitted Nooria.

“Can I...,” asked Maymoona pointing to the wall.

“Sure, May. You’re welcomed.”

Maymoona then moved away and began playing with the light panels on the wall of the house. They were like little squares of light that one could push close, or push open. She liked the odor of essential oils coming from it too, and the fresh air that filtered through the conditioning panels. Each time she was pulling a panel, she was telling Mia about the colors.

Jealousy suddenly crept into Nooria’s heart, just a few seconds, just enough to stir invisible pins in her chest.

Zia asked, “Did we come at the wrong time?”

Nooria answered, “Not at all. Remember, I’m the one who invited you in the first place.” And she pressed her body against her sister’s. She was afraid to show how baldly she felt and her heart ached so much from the conversation she just had with her husband, she could not trust herself not to let it all show. She finally declared after swallowing a few times and looking around at the young girls, “There’s no easy button...”

She pulled gently from her sister’s embrace, and turned towards the kitchen while asking, “Would you care for tea?”

“Uh... sure, sis. That’d be great.”

Nooria carried the teapot to the living room. She never let the robots do this. “It’s no big

deal,” she told her guests, “I have two hands, don’t I?” But she could not help being a hazard in the kitchen. She dropped a few cookies on the floor, and she knocked the tea set over with her trembling fingers.

Seeing her sister coming from the kitchen, Zia pushed away the packages that were displayed on the coffee table. A plush toy tucked hurriedly in a big gift bag fell off the table. Nooria saw it, trembled, reached for it, and the tea started to pour on the floor. Zia ran to help her sister steady herself.

She stayed close to Nooria for a few minutes without saying anything. Nooria was now wrenching the toy with her wet fingers, unable to pull herself together.

Zia tried to say something here and there, “Er... hmm... Er...,” but nothing came out of her mouth. What could she say?

Suddenly, the pot fell on the floor and shattered. Nooria stroke the delicate and soft toy fit for a baby’s skin, cradled it in her arms and held it close. She burst into a torrent of tears as if she had contained all the sad moments of her life and finally had let it drop all at once over this teddy bear that did not have any face.

Zia understood right away, took her sister by the shoulders, and helped her sit on the couch. Her roommate went to get the wet and dry robot to clean up, all the way exclaiming, “Oh my God, Oh my God! Will she be all right?”

Zia did not pay attention and asked her sister privately, “Are you invited to a baby shower again?!”

Nooria nodded.

“Hello, people!!” cried out Zia in disbelief as if addressing someone in the room. “Are you dumb or something?”

“Did I do something?” asked Maymoona as she came back running.

Nooria shook her head, looking pallid and staring at them. “I don’t know, Zia..., er... May.” confessed Nooria still sobbing. “Sometimes I feel like I’m in Hell. Every time I go outside, it feels like just about every female is now pregnant.” She looked at Maymoona and muttered some excuses. She continued, “And my friends! They all know what I’m going through but they have no IDEA what I’m going through, you know? I used to confide in a couple of them every small detail of this roller coaster. Every blood test. Every phone call from the doctor. But now I don’t. And it makes it harder for me to only have my hubby... but like I say, I don’t need their pity. And I don’t need one more person saying, "It’ll happen for you too!" I feel like strangling them because they don’t know how much I want a baby, how many times I’ve been poked, prodded, anxious, let down, and so on... They just 'oops' turn up pregnant.”

She looked again towards Maymoona up and down, trying not to rest her gaze on her belly. She said, “Sorry, May.”

Maymoona came sitting on the couch near her and exclaimed at the sight of all the baby stuff in the bags and pulling them out one by one, “What, another baby shower!?! Are you kidding?!”

Nooria looked at her apologetically, “I was just asked to host the baby shower for another nurse on the same day that my three-day-late period started!”

“Talk about crying your eyes out,” exclaimed Maymoona in disbelief.

“Then having to fake a smile!” added Nooria.

Zia exclaimed revolted, ”These people have no heart. Sometimes I have to wonder just where people get their ideas and common sense from!!! What thinking, considerate co-worker would ask a woman struggling with fertility issues to host a baby shower for a distant

employee?!? Remember this one, Nooria?"

"It's not your fault," said Maymoona gently caressing Nooria's hair.

Nooria, encouraged, confessed more, "By the way, I'm sorry, but that little zinger about "God's will," I'm through with it. Do you actually think those words would comfort me?!!" She then put her arms around both girls' shoulders and continued, "O, Shishies... it is getting harder to be a happy person... And it is so hard to be happy for others... I know, I know... I tell myself every time: Go to this baby shower. Get stronger. It is not the last baby on the shelf... this person didn't step ahead of you in line, but..." Nooria could not finish; a series of sobs made her unable to speak more.

Zia tapped Nooria's hands and softly uttered, "Patience, dear. Patience... We must have certain faith that there is reward and much good in what Allah has decreed for us. We should think about the situation and lives of other people; some people have crazy children..."

Maymoona took Nooria other hand to comfort her and echoed, "Yes, that's true."

Zia continued, "Other children are handicapped..."

"True, true," agreed Maymoona.

"And most parents nowadays are suffering from their children's disobedience, severing of family ties, and so on. You do not know if it is a blessing or a disgrace..."

Maymoona shot a glare at her. She stopped, worried about saying the right things, and then she added to pierce the embarrassing silence, "God be praised. Aren't Muslims supposed to be in prison on this earth while non-Muslims are supposed to be in Paradise, then, when we die, all is reversed?"

Nooria lifted her eyes, and declared painfully, "That was stupid, I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so all worked up about this, I had a break down."

Zia hesitated, but she had to tell her sister what she thought to herself, "Have you thought that... uh... maybe you're just not ready for this? I mean maybe Allah does not want to burden you at this point."

Nooria glared, and clenched the toy so much she burst one of its arms, "Gee! I refuse to believe that infertility is because God doesn't think we're ready to have children. So many people who are not ready for it still get it!"

She looked at Maymoona sideways, and said, "Er, I'm not talking about you, May."

"Thanks." Maymoona nodded with understanding.

Nooria continued, "I mean, mostly infertility is a health problem, as is heart disease, the flu. And in Islam, it is our responsibility to take care of our health and bodies. It is not all out of our hands. If I believed so, I would just get sick out of grief, I mean, seriously sick."

Maymoona stood up straight and placed a hand on Nooria's shoulder to show her sympathy.

She whole heartily declared, "I hope and pray from God that may He bless you with pious and righteous children. I hope that God will remove all your sins because of all the suffering you are going through. I wish it would be you and not me who were carrying this child just to see you happy again, Nooria."

"That's something to hold onto," smiled Nooria touched. "But what do we do when we want something so bad we are ready to do anything for it? What do we do when each and every one of our actions is made for the same purpose, even going to work to make money so we can afford the infertility clinic?"

Nooria suddenly eased into a long sorrow that had been bubbling for months. She put her head in her hands, and removed the tears as soon as they came out, one after the other, mechanically.

Zia tried to reassure her, “Hey, sis. Every sixty seconds you spend upset is a minute of happiness you'll never get back.”

Nooria smiled feebly out of politeness.

Zia looked around to try to find something that could help her sister calm down. She soon locked her eyes onto her roommate’s eyes. Her roommate was looking at a collection of boxes set in a transparent wall closet. She looked up and down several times, looking at Nooria and at the closet. She finally exclaimed in an attempt to lighten the tension, “Oh my God, Nooria, you should really consider buying stock in the home pregnancy test and ovulation tests companies!”

The closet was full of them. She probably had used every single brand sold in the retail market both in pharmacies and discount stores and online.

Nooria remembered every single one of those tests. She had used one, and then had left the other one in the box, hoping the product did not really work right. And she had done this systematically for each and every one of the boxes displayed. She was so excited every time, hoping and praying that IT would be the one. She shrugged. Somehow, she was pitiful.

Nooria dried her tears with the edge of her dress.

“I can’t believe it!” Zia looked puzzled, “Couldn’t you get the tests from the clinic? I mean, aren’t you a midwife after all?”

“No, I hate to see the faces of my co-workers when I get one more test and one more box out of the pharmacy. It feels humiliating.”

“I see...” She squeezed her sister’s hands in a gesture of understanding.

Nooria looked at the teddy bear carefully and declared, “Nowadays, they make bears without a face; it’s like children do not have to see a face anymore. Computers and robots raise them. They say kids are supposed to put someone’s photo in here. You know why?”

Zia and Maymoona shook their head in silence.

Nooria continued, "It is because they change caregivers so many times, they do not remember anymore who their parents are or who their mom is. People just hate children. Children hate their parents. And I'm the crazy one who wants children! Go figure..."

Maymoona came closer to Nooria and said softly, "I understand." She took the toy from Nooria's hands and confessed while playing with it, turning it this way and that way, "Before I came to Islamdale, people gave me guff sometimes for being married and for "selling myself out" when I could use my time to pursue other self-centered things in life. I feel like there is a lot of prejudice against people who want to have kids these days. It seems like some members of society treat people with kids like they are a drain on resources and completely selfish. And they do not see the point of being a homemaker. What, they say, you will be burning your chances of having a life."

"This bothers me a lot," said Nooria interested. "I am pretty convinced that planning for, and having children is the most selfless thing a person can do. So much is sacrificed to raise a family. And nowadays men prefer to stay at home and raise the kids; they feel safer at home."

"Yes," agreed Maymoona, "but to willingly give up so much freedom and income to experience the joys that come with having a family are greater than the sacrifice."

Nooria dried her tears and explained, "What I believe is that the greater the sacrifice, the more the reward that comes back to you. Essentially, there is no such thing as sacrifice because the return is always greater than what you gave up."

Zia smiled lightly, amazed at all the thoughts the two women shared. Nooria had known Maymoona for some time, but she had never met this side of her, this mom side she had carefully hidden from everyone. That was true; being a mom in the fourth Millennium was anything close

to courageous. She now could understand how it was for Maymoona to be pregnant and without a partner. She wished Maymoona's husband had not disappeared. People said good things about him, but neither her nor Zia had had the chance to meet him before, not even once. He would have been a great father, no doubt. Why wasn't Maymoona more sad about his disappearance? That was puzzling. Recently, Maymoona seemed even happier than before. Right now even she was smiling.

Zia interrupted Nooria's line of thought. She declared, "I personally have a lot of trouble with the way children are raised in this country, and that is probably a deterrent for some. I feel like if I were to raise my child as someone who was educated about the world before high school, I would catch flak for that. I just see a lot of how selfish kids can be up through high school, and how little their parents have taught them to appreciate what's around them. I don't think this is a universal thing of 'teenagers being teenagers' because teens in other parts of the world can be far more capable of appreciation than those here. I believe it is a social construct that raises children this way. I mention this because it is a deterrent for me, knowing that any child of mine would still be brought up in a culture where coddling children to think of certain things, for instance, technology and the choice to waste food, as a right and not a privilege."

"Well, the dumbing down of society, you know, sis."

"What are you talking about?" asked Maymoona, puzzled.

"Oh, my dad is a book archeologist, you know," replied Nooria. "One day, in the basement of an old building, he found a book that was talking about a plot from the government to dumb us down. Drugs and the screen played the major role, so that few at the top could control the society. He even found books for Dummies, a bunch of them actually."

"Really? That would figure..." said Maymoona sarcastically.

“Anyway, I'm seventeen years old,” announced Zia, “and I have no desire to have children, not because I'm smart, but because, for one, I'm selfish, and for two, I know I'll screw it up.”

“No, you wouldn't, dear,” protested Maymoona. “Listen, Zia. I'm horrified because where I'm from literally everyone I know has had a kid. I know maybe thirty teenagers or young adults with children. Mostly unmarried girls with children. Those kids won't go to college. I hate to stereotype people and put them in a bowl, but I know the mothers, I know most of the fathers, and I know, I KNOW, how the kids will turn out. They won't be bad people. They'll probably drink too much, smoke too much, try too many drugs, work minimum wage jobs. Three generations will be living in the same houses because they can't afford anything else. It's scary and it's sad. But you, you have all the chances on your side, a great family, so you would be a great mom. Me too. Frankly, I am so grateful for my parents because they set an example for us of what love and family is "supposed" to be like, and they forced me to come to Islamdale, and got me out of a crummy little town. I know too many people who have kids that shouldn't to ever want one of my own. But I do have one and I have no regret because I know better, and you know better, too.”

Nooria smiled, listening to the young girl. Her sorrow had abated as quickly as it had poured out. She felt like finding the adult inside herself again. She did not want to discuss this further; she had had enough for the day.

She concluded, “Here's the problem I see... basically you can separate all people into those contributing to overpopulation, and those who are trying to reduce overpopulation by voluntarily not reproducing. Those not reproducing will die out, and those who are a part of the problem - which includes anyone following the social norms, religious sects that have huge

families, tribal nations that have no concept of protection, etc. - will continue to reproduce. So the people trying to solve the problem are choosing to die out while the people who are the problem will continue to be the problem. Isn't that so? If you don't want to reproduce, Zia, so that you won't have descendants living in a grossly overpopulated world, it makes sense... but the people trying to find an answer deciding to die out actually make the problem worse in the long run. Plus... illnesses, various influenza mutations, war, disasters... the world has a whole lot of ways to cull the human population. We're just here for the ride..."

"Yeah..." replied the two girls thoughtfully.

There was a long pause.

Finally, Zia declared, "All this mess just discourages me from getting married, from falling in love and all that. I am a Muslim and I know I cannot have a kid if I'm not married, but what if I got married? I just don't want to have to think of all these contradictions."

Nooria sighed, stood up, and walked towards the kitchen, "Oh, that's not so bad. So much for trying to solve the problems of the world." She said with a grin. "Do you guys still want a cup of tea?"

"No thanks," said Maymoona.

Zia shook her head and looked down. She was thinking about Nooria's situation, and she wished her sister happy. After getting deep into her feelings, she shrugged it off and asked,

"Is it worth it?"

"What's worth it?" asked Maymoona puzzled. "Having kids?"

"No," declared Zia twisting her finger in her lap, "The whole idea of being alive."

"Well," said Maymoona gazing at Nooria who was gazing back at her, "that's a wide jump in topics."

Nooria looked puzzled. She declared, “But, Zia. It’s what being human mean. If you doubt about the basics, you might as well doubt about everything else.”

“You know, this is how I see all this, life, marriage, children,” said Zia matter of factly. “How can you go through your life without experiencing any of these or not thinking about them?”

“Good question,” said Maymoona.

“Well... Er,” added Zia. “If I listen to you it seems to me that marriage and the kids decision is like being locked up in a dead end. Sure, I want it, like everybody else, but at the same time that’s the last thing I want. Really. The last thing... And if I become an *imam* one day, I wouldn’t have to. I would just put everything I have on this.”

Nooria did not answer. She was busy sponging the kitchen’s counter and seemed to concentrate on casting down her eyes. She finally raised her eyes up and said, “You know that Muslims are supposed to be married, Zia. What is this talk about becoming a nun?”

Maymoona stood up, looked a few times towards Zia, and just squeezed her mouth tighter. There was nothing they could say to that.

In the end, Zia got herself off the couch, hugged her sister Nooria goodbye and asked, “So, are you still planning to come clean up the attic with us on Saturday?”

“Sure,” said Nooria with a reassuring smile.

“Cool,” said Maymoona, in a hurry to go, “We’ll pick you up at the High. We have to go to school now. We’re late.”

“Sure,” said Nooria feebly.

“Oh!” said Zia before going out. “By the way, May is looking for a nurse midwife. Something happened to her doctor. Do you have room for another patient?”

“Yes,” said Nooria with a smile. “How far along, May?”

“Almost eight months.”

“Drop in at my office whenever you can,” said Nooria professionally. “Zia knows my schedule.”

“Cool,” said Maymoona happily, “Thank you.”

And she closed the door behind them. It was time to get ready for work.

Kids' Experiments

On their way to school, Zia leaned back on the air-stable seat of the Subair and asked Maymoona anxiously, "May, why didn't you ask Nooria about your cousin?"

Maymoona did not reply for a minute or two, and then she turned back towards her friend and said soberly, "She has so much on her mind. I thought she could not handle something else."

"Why not? Why couldn't she?"

"Because I was about to ask her to take my niece in for a few weeks, but she's obviously over her head."

Zia shrugged. "She's a nurse; she is in charge of other beings every day."

"You think so?"

"Sure. She might enjoy taking care of a little girl for a while. Actually, I am sure she would, at least until your mom's sister is ready for custody."

Maymoona stiffened at the sound of the word custody and declared briskly, "We'll see that later. I am not expecting her until next week. We'll find a solution."

"You'd better because your mom really counts on you and your niece really looks up to you."

Maymoona looked away again and did not answer. Deep thoughts were probing her head. *Oh, no*, thought Zia. They were late.

They entered the classroom. Around them, the entire class was silent and absorbed in their experiments. No one was allowed any electronics in the classroom, so no one was allowed to speak. Miss Chem's rule number one. Beside, without a phone, nobody had anything to talk about. The girls settled down.

“Crap!” a voice broke the silence. Zia and Maymoona looked up in amazement. Today the weather was oppressive at the High, no wonder someone was out of sorts. Maymoona glared at her classmates and raised an eyebrow. They were doing a biology lab, and that required all their concentration. Their teacher, Mrs. Chem had talked a long time about life on earth, and how precious it was the last time they met. She had mentioned how technology had helped earth stay in harmony despite the overwhelming damage done by pollution. Now, they were applying the concept they had learned.

“Load of crap!” busted the voice on the other side of the room. “Crap! Just plain crap!”

The teacher suddenly froze and looked alarmed. Everybody turned around looking bothered and shocked. Nobody liked interruptions, but this kid was interrupting and being rude. The school code did not allow crude words. It definitely sounded like trouble. The kid suddenly pulled out a weapon from a bag he had brought to class. Zia looked at it but did not recognize the rifle. It looked very ancient and anyways nobody used rifles anymore. That’s probably why it had not been detected at the school’s check in. The kid had probably taken it from someone’s collection. *Would this rifle shoot?* she thought, assessing the situation. *Or, is it jammed and that is just a scare tactic to attract our attention?*

The boy continued, looking satisfied with the attention he had drawn. He started to blow his insides out, gasping as if in pain, “Like what’s the point? You live for 30 years if you’re lucky, and you die. What’s the point? Like if this is all we have, on this crappy planet with each other, then life really isn’t worth living.”

The teacher walked up a few steps, her hands raised in front of her to show him she was unarmed, and tried to deal with him gently.

“I have had the same thoughts and feelings since I was a teenager,” she said. “Yes, you probably will live for only thirty or maybe forty years, the last decade or so probably suffering from some kind of illness, and what we see is what we get, and it doesn't seem like much - but I found there is a bit more to consider. I realized there are billions of people on the Earth. Of these billions, we are one of the few who have a family, a job, and a few good friends. Already, in this country, that makes us one in a few that is lucky enough to have those things.”

The boy whistled loudly. “That’s how you live, lady, feeling sorry for the other sorry side of the world? Not good enough!” He was still waving his rifle into the air as if to tell people to come with new arguments as fast as they could.

The teacher continued, trying to find other convincing arguments, “Now I look at when I exist. I don't exist in the past without electricity, without good medicine, without technology, without the amazing creativity around us. We are living in the best time in human history. We are enormously lucky, I think, to enjoy the fruits of the labor of all that have come before us. We have good stuff to go with all the bad stuff, and I think there is more than enough good stuff to offset the bad stuff. That seems more than fair. We do not have to pull anything out of a hat to get at these things.”

Zia thought she was off base. This kid was not ready to hear about others; he was ready to do some damage to himself. She decided to try her chances. She climbed on a chair so he could see her better, and started to gesture to emphasize what she was saying, “Well... Some people believe in God. That helps a lot of people. But you know the feeling you get while you’re in love? Or you’re around friends? Well maybe that’s why we live. For love? Just think about it. Most people crave it, it’s a good feeling and while you’re in love all you wanna do is be with that

person, not die, just live. We can help you find someone like this... I mean, it's not like we have penury of women who are craving for your attention..."

"The hell with the women," he shouted in answer, "that's the problem, way too many women. And, by the way, I'm gay! Life isn't worth living most of the time, trust me, I get so blue but I don't know how to cheer myself up. That's the problem."

Zia did not want to let go and tried every idea she could think of, "Diaries are good. Meditation can help, so can positive affirmations. All three are ways to choose what your mind thinks about. If you take control of your thoughts, and choose not to feel bad, believe it or not, you can drive bad stuff away. You know how if you try you can convince yourself that you feel sick? It works the other way too, you know; you can convince yourself you feel great."

"Okay, now this is a crash course in clearing your head?" he said angrily, his arm trembling out of frustration and his index finger getting lower in the trigger. "Are you f*** playing with me?"

The teacher tried to reclaim the attention while Zia climbed down the chair with a painful sigh. Maymoona looked frightened, and she started to duck under the table, ever so slowly.

"Yeah this happens to me too... feeling blue," continued Miss Chem. "It does not last forever. Normally it only lasts like a day or two if not less than that, but it's awful I know, you feel lonely, and like you don't fit in, and a whole lot else... I understand you. What I do is I try to keep busy, when I'm that down, it helps me most of the time, crying on someone's shoulder help a lot too, but if there's no one's shoulder around it makes you feel even worse. Just try to keep

positive, life is worth living, even though it seems terrible at times, you'll get through it, say it to yourself - in a day or two I'll feel better.”

He yelled at the top of his voice, “What do you understand? Holy crap! You guys are pathetic!” His anger rose in the air as a menace, and people started running out of fear.

Seeing the panic around him, he lost it in an attempt to control the situation. A mean grin embedded in his face. He started shooting randomly.

Maymoona threw herself under a table, panting and yelling “Zia! On the floor, now!”

Zia shivered out of fear, feeling a cold wave going up and down her spine. She stepped forward with difficulty and tripped over someone’s feet. The light went off but Zia felt her way around. She felt like she could not move her body anymore.

Suddenly, the guards ran in and grabbed the boy in an attempt to disarm him. A hand suddenly grabbed the two girls and pulled them on their feet. It was a rough hand with strong knuckles, a hand of a man. She smelled a strange odor coming from the one who had grabbed her under and pushed her towards an exit door. As he pulled her, half carrying her, she felt long hair with a strong smell of perspiration slamming her face. She could hear Maymoona following as she breathed very hard behind them. The man drove them in another room, far from the shooting. She could hear people screaming and the bang of the rifle echoing in the room as well as flashes of light accompanying it. More security guards were pulling out students one by one.

“What...?” she heaved trying to catch her breath as they ran outside. She looked at the man perplexed, frightened and a little angry. She yanked out of his grip and yelled, “What on earth is going on here?”

“Well... aw... We have to evacuate. Orders...” he said trying to regain the control of her arm. He pulled her towards the court stairs. Zia stayed focused, not believing her eyes.

“Well... you are not answering my question.”

“Watch out!”

A series of shots followed them outside, dribbling the walls. Zia grabbed Maymoona’s hand and pulled as hard as she could. She followed closely, breathing really hard. And then silence. Then... nothing, for several minutes. They both crouched behind the flight of stairs, their back trying to melt into it. Maymoona crunched on the floor. Zia turned to look at the man.

“What are you doing here? I’ve never seen you before. You are not the regular school guard.”

Maymoona looked exhausted, and she was holding her belly with both her hands. Zia put her arm around her friend’s shoulders with a worried look on her face.

“Breathe, May, breathe. Everything will be all right.”

She suddenly turned towards the man and yelled at him, “So?”

“Why don’t you thank me and get over it?” he finally exploded, looking towards the classroom and listening for any suspect sound. He still had one arm around her arm.

“Thanks!” she said, shrugging her shoulders to get free to no avail. She pulled one knuckle of his fingers after the other until his hand relaxed. His arms were hard and cold like ice. His fingerprints were embedded into her arm. She stroked her skin in pain.

“Anyway, what is this kid doing here? I thought everybody’s vitals were checked. Why did you arrive so late?” she gasped.

“I’m not the school guard,” he answered evasively.

“Really? Then who are you?” she inquired surprised.

“Your personal guard,” he answered mechanically, not looking at her.

“What!?”

He turned around. She looked incredulous.

He filled her in with the details, “Well... You have a subscription with us. I’m just doing my job.”

“Dad,” she whispered. Then she said louder, “All right. Does this subscription give me the right to know what is exactly happening in the other room?”

“Sure. It’s a training kid.”

“A what?”

“A war training kid.”

“I do not understand.”

“Well... When all the fuss was about video games causing kids to have aggressive behavior, people did some research.”

He swallowed. Zia encouraged him, looking into his eyes with fierceness and nodding her head, interested. He looked away, feeling the burn more deeply still.

“So, what were the results?” encouraged Zia with impatience.

He looked around and continued with a worried expression on his face, “Research concluded that first person shooter video games train players for killing. This research was proven so conclusive that the United States Army developed a popular free recruitment video game used as a virtual boot camp and killing simulator.”

“Ugh! I am wondering why people are still popping kids into the world. It is a suicidal society. Everybody is depressed or what, or maybe going crazy!” erupted Zia upset. “No offense, May.”

“Their parents don’t want them,” added the guy without any feeling.

She looked at her fiend before adding, “So, they are training these kids here?”

“Precisely,” confirmed the guard.

“Man! And all of this is happening right here in our school?”

In response, he shook his shoulders, “None of my business, Miss.”

Zia’s expression transformed into a mask. She shook her head still bewildered, “Are these kids plugged to the lab?” The guard did not answer. A minute later, she answered her question, nodding her head several times, “Yyyeah...” she whispered, swallowing hard. “This kid is nobody’s business. We are all victims here, right? No one’s guilty! And our school is involved in that! We must complain, do something. Don’t you think, May?”

“They all do,” Maymoona popped in. “That’s where the funds come from. Come on, Zia, don’t be naïve. Everybody knows that. Everybody does military; it pays.”

“This kid was trained in our school lab!” she said, shaking her head from side to side.

”Don’t you understand?”

“Please, keep it quiet, will you?” intervened the guard.

Zia stopped to think a few seconds, then she waved his concerns aside, “Now you want me to keep it quiet?!”

“It is also in your interest, Miss.”

“But... don’t you see?” outpoured Zia in shock. “These games are disguised as an innocent recreational activity, but are in reality a life killer! Look at this kid, and tell me if he has a chance to live a normal life? And all the other kids! I believe that they stunt social maturity. They don't realize that the game is sucking the life out of their relationships. No relationships and you’ve created a blindfolded herd. Don’t you think these games instill a spirit of apathy and create a sense of purposelessness in people's lives?”

The guard, embarrassed and exasperated, ordered, “Save your tears for the kids around the world who can barely get by a day without food. These kids have a choice. You have no reason to cry. In the end, you're only hurting yourself to keep all of it bottled up. If you’ve got to tell the world about them, go ahead! Who cares?! Even their parents do not care. Express your emotions, capture that deepest part of your sadness and put it on paper, art, music, meditate or scream. Express yourself in a constructive way. Maybe it will change something.”

Zia’s anger mounted inside her. She was speechless.

Maymoona stood up slowly. She seemed to feel better now. She said, doubling her friend, “Who cares, right? They are orphans! Who is the terrorist? Eh? Tell me now! The army just took

the opportunity to take them under their wing for their own profit. These kids will never be living a normal life.”

“What?!” said Zia feeling dizzy. “This kid was adopted? By the army? Not by people?”

He tried for the last time to calm Zia down, “Come on, Miss.”

Their neighbor Anne ran past them and, seeing Maymoona, came back and asked, looking genuinely worried, “Are you guys doing okay? Did you see this kid? He is so cute, what a shame!”

Zia became red in the face. Her eyes popped out of her face and her mouth turned into a rictus. She could not help yelling at the top of her lungs, “You’re so screwed up. So... so... All of you!”

She hurried upstairs, towards her Subair, pulling Maymoona along with her. Her head was like a crazy place right now; she really did not want to hurt anyone and this guard was like he was asking for it.

Sounds In The Attic

Zia woke up with a start.

In her dream, someone with a long knife and looking like the school guard was trying to cut her belly open.

She felt terrified. She clapped for the lights to switch on and searched the bedroom with her eyes. She remembered suddenly how frightened by dreams she had felt as a child. Well, it felt exactly the same now except that she was much older. In her dream, she could hear the popping of the guard's fingers as he came closer to her. That sounded too real, too close. Against all logic, she decided to check every corner of the condo, in the closets, under the tables, behind the couch, everywhere. She was able to breathe properly only when she was sure there was no one in the apartment and she was safe. She envied Maymoona's profound sleep. She put her ear against her door to make sure she was doing okay but did not hear anything on the other side. She did not dare wake up her friend and she was too angry at herself for being so childish. She was going to relax a little when, suddenly, she heard the knuckle sound again.

"Yeeee!" she creamed uncontrollably. Pop pop pop. The sound seemed to cross the room, from one side to the other. Zia looked around her, one hand around her neck and the other caressing her hair nervously. At the end of her rope, she went to Maymoona's room and scratched on the door. No answer. She pressed it open and whispered, "May, are you awake?"

Silence. Zia could see a form on the bed but no movement. She scrutinized the room. Nothing scary here. She turned back; it seemed too selfish to try to wake up her friend. Maymoona's baby had kicked her all the way from the school and she had felt nauseated. Mia had put a lot of pressure on her lungs as she stretched and could not seem to be able to settle

down. Maymoona took the 3D viewer and x-rayed her belly to see what was going on. Both girls had watched the baby kick and stretch and push her toes in Maymoona's sides as if she was sharing every emotions Maymoona was feeling. But she looked okay; at least she wasn't hurt. After taking some homeopathic pills, the baby had seemed to calm down and Maymoona started to yawn and doze. She prayed both Sundown and Night prayers together, arguing that she was falling asleep on her feet. Since then, she had disappeared into her room. Zia had not heard a sound and she was sleeping like a log. Zia rasped again against her roommate's door. Nothing. She decided to stop. It felt wrong. After all, Maymoona was going to have a baby and she needed all the rest she could get.

Next, Zia tried to concentrate in order to find the provenance of the sound. Is it from here? No, it would be stronger. Then, is it outside? No, it would not be so clear. All of a sudden, a loud crack seemed to break the entire ceiling. The sound made Zia's blood go up and down her body like a wild fire. The rush of adrenaline made her tremble from head to foot. The ceiling, yes, the ceiling! Someone or something was out there in the attic!

Zia ran to the elevator and made double sure it was closed. The girls never locked this door. There was no point since the terrace was automatically sealed-locked from the inside and it had a finger recognition device installed on the latch. Nonetheless, Zia locked the elevator door and tried a few times to push on it to reassure herself that it could not be forced. The girls would have to investigate the next day.

Another minute passed. She heard the pop go away like a distant earthquake. She tried to relax and finally convinced herself it was just an animal that had found its way through the roof. That wasn't unheard of anyways.

That night, Zia could not find a way to fall asleep. She tossed around, drunk some chamomile mixed with the Dream-for-Sure powder advertised to replace the sheep counting strategy. She went out briefly to get a gust of fresh air, but it was even colder than the day before and she felt so oppressed her lungs seemed to burn in her chest. She tried the 5D screen but became bored by every single program she watched. She envied her roommate so.

In the morning, she wanted to tell everything to Maymoona but the girl had already left for school. Zia looked at the time; it was 10 o'clock; she had overslept. She took the elevator to see if Maymoona's vehicle was upstairs or not. Before entering the attic, she searched for an electric wand to take with her in case the pops from the night happened to come from something real. As she was stepping inside the attic, the light went off. How odd. It was now hard to see the remote parts of the attic. She listened attentively for a few minutes before stepping forward ever so slowly, listening for any sound until she stumbled over a box. She leaned forward and patted around with her hands. She felt all kinds of objects lying on the floor. The attic was a mess! A door suddenly shut and Zia ran back into her condo, her heart leaping unevenly in her chest. She closed the elevator latch and stayed there, against the door, her ears applied on the wall. No sound. Nothing.

Zia thought of calling the management office right away to inquire more about her neighbor but thought they might shoo her away. After all, she could not accuse her neighbor without proof. She shrugged, still trembling of fright, and decided to call the street patrol instead. She was not going to the roof alone one more time.

Why did Maymoona go without me? She thought, perplexed. *Maybe she tried to wake me up but couldn't. Yes! That must be it.*

Conversation With Mom

After the emotions of the night before, Zia decided to take it easy. The patrol came in and did not find anything except for the mess. Up to her, it was not unusual and it was not the work of an ill-minded person. It looked more like someone or something was trying to find her way home and missed the elevator. There was nothing to do. Zia stayed at home this rainy day. She tried to dismiss the whole story and fit once more into her Zen state of mind. She wished she were gutsier. She wished she could jump into her Subair and go to the TIMnasium, but today, she did not feel like mixing with neighbors and strangers. She also did not care about walking into the acid rain; her clothes would become messy and would need to be changed on her way in the building and once at home. Besides, in a weather like that the visibility was reduced to seventy percent, making trips more hazardous, and attacks of bronchitis were more frequent. She wished Maymoona had stayed home. It was hard to breathe outside on a day like this; the fog that settled on permanence over the town was hard enough as it was to suffer. Besides, she was really spooked by what had happened in the attic. Could her neighbor have missed his entry spot? Maybe. Why not? He was new to the building and it was night. Why would he come home in the middle of the night? Once again, why not?

She tried to refocus her thoughts on something less ominous. Her thoughts came back to her first Yoga class. She felt a strange attraction towards the TIMnasium; this whole place spoke to her. Maybe it just stood pure in the middle of the polluted land or like a mast in the fog of her life. Sail on, Zia, sail on, it seemed to tell her. Sail... on...

She clicked on her voice recorder and listened to the quotation sister Munira had told them about the other day:

“When the five senses and the mind are still, and reason itself rests in silence, then

begins the Path supreme. This calm steadiness is called Yoga. Then one should become watchful, because Yoga comes and goes.”

She just loved the way this citation sounded, all the implications, all the flying that was going on in her mind when she was thinking about it. And it sounded so much like faith, at least how faith made her feel.

She gulped a *halal* marshmallow made from organic veggies, and then called her mom on the holophone. She missed her conversations with her mom the most since she had left home.

“Hey, mom! How is it going?”

“Good, thanks to Allah,” answered her mom calmly.

She was not really here, just a projection as a holographic image on the sofa at her side. But she was present in real time because of the holographic teleportation device.

“May is not in. She is at the High.”

“All right,” answered her mother, “I hope she was able to find a good shelter from the burning rain.”

“This place is so spooky when it rains, isn’t it Mom?”

“I know, darling. The pollution harvesters have not been very successful in the sky, and the water is so contaminated, I do not think there is much hope for the future.”

She looked sulked. Zia tried a different topic; she really did not need all this depressive treatment to feel better.

“Listen, Mom, I am so excited by this, I just need to share it with someone...”

She read from her notes to the hologram while resting her head on her mom’s virtual lap.

”Sister Munira was saying the other day that *‘prayer quiets the mind. Doing it at the same time every day or so, brings discipline that prolongs our ability to pray more.’* Muslims say

that salat refreshes the mind, don't they?"

Zia's mom, Aymeema, nodded but did not say anything.

Zia added, "Performing *salât*, we learn to trust; if we concentrate properly, have proper concentration, and we perform more of it, the words of faith touch us more deeply and are renewed. This is so much how I feel, Mom. Isn't that just beautiful?"

"Beautiful? Beauty is not enough, dear. Do you practice this with her?"

"Yeah, I guess we worked on this during class time, but it's hard; our brain is so taken by images and sounds."

"So many ads," declared Zia's mom meditatively, "so many news, so many background sounds. Sometimes I feel like I can't quite contain all of them in my head at once."

"Yes, right, as if they pulled us away from what we are. I wish you were there though."

"Right," said her mom pensively. "I wish it too. I miss sharing new experiences with you."

"Wow! Imagine, Mom, the power of the words! When I'll be an *Imam*, I'm going to put those words on a wall with gold chalk for my entire congregation to see!"

Aymeema caressed her cat she held in her arms and made a sound with her throat as a way of acquiescing.

"I will wait for that day."

Zia continued, feeling encouraged, "Mom, you know... I believe that sounds have a lot of power. See, we may feel utterly stressed by a repetitive sound. Talk about my neighbor and its buzz. Know what I mean?" She raised her eyes to the sky in disgust.

"Oh, yeah, your annoying neighbor," confirmed Aymeema.

"Listen, Mom, recently I've had a tough time praying, like having lots of thoughts. I'm

like overloaded.”

Aymeema grinned and said “Don’t worry, dear. We tend to go all over the places in our minds when we have a minute of quiet, right? Having regrets, planning, remembering. Someone said ‘As rust eats iron, so care eats the heart.’“

“So, you too, Mom?”

“We all go through the same stages, dear.”

At this moment, the cat opened one eye, saw Zia and meowed in the petophone. The translator voiced, “I love you, Zia, when are you coming over to see us?”

“Not yet Kitty.”

“Can someone scratch more between the eyes?” the cat said or rather the machine translated for it.

Zia smiled. Nobody had pets, but her mom had one. That said a lot about her mom. She always cared for others. Her mom should have been a doctor, a psychologist or such instead of being a housewife.

“I love you too, Kitty,” she said stretching her arms as if to take the cat in hers. The image flickered but she encountered only an empty space.

Aymeema scrubbed gently under the cat’s cheekbones and recited, absorbed as if to herself,

“The Quran says: ‘Whoever is in the heavens and the earth, and the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and all living moving creatures, and many of mankind pray God.’ I believe that the one who finds this moment of silence inside her will make friends with God. Too bad it is so hard to get...”

“It comes and go, doesn’t it Mom? I mean faith comes and go, I do feel that so...”

Aymeema agreed, “It is hard to keep it going at the same rate. I hope it comes and goes through and through with you, Zia, and still stays with you always. An old writer named St Augustine said one day: *‘People travel to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering.’* Maybe you should spend more time wondering about yourself and a little less about the world. Maybe that will bring your peace.”

“That is so profound, Mom! Oh, I do love talking with you. I wish I weren’t so upset with Dad all the time otherwise I would come visit you more.”

“You call. That’s enough for me.”

“Thanks, Mom. It’s time for Asr prayer. *Assalam alaikum*. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Already, dear? Time is passing by so fast lately...”

The holographic teleportation device turned off replaced by the regular 5-D screen.

Zia stood up to pray.

Annoying buzzing door

After her prayers, Zia settled down on the couch in the levitation mode. She liked the rocking of the sofa in the air; it was very appeasing. Maybe she would be able to relax now. She told the screen to send her calming waves as she turned it on and she let the program take her away. Soon, she entered her Zen space again turned on by the machine's alpha waves. The 5-D screen program made her mouth water. Mmm, fast foods were gourmets' centers at a very reasonable price. She used metabolizing boosters on a daily basis, which eliminated the need for weight control. These products changed most foodstuffs into body waste and were totally non-nutritive. But she, as well as many consumers, could enjoy five meals a day, including the Ice Cream Sundae Break. Two meals a day were regular meals. For beverages, she enjoyed disease-prevention drinkables, which actually controlled cancer, vascular problems and kidney malfunctions, or she just picked any liquids and turned it into pure water using her portable VapoWarerSafe. She only needed to drop a pill into her glass in order to get all of her vitamins; these pills contained physiologically functional ingredients, such as calcium, fiber, Omega-3 fatty acids, and all the vitamins and nutrients she was prescribed by her doctor. She had yet to try the emotion-reaction foods, and really she felt like she might need some today. *Let's try these*, she told herself. *Why not?*

The 5-D Screen bellowed a new ad:

“Moody? Not in a good mood? These edibles can turn your mood around. Consumers' emotion changing foods are now available in such products as Healthy Joy Cookies, Uplifters Potato Snacks and Feel Good Granola Bars. Try your new mood today!”

Mmm! So tempting, thought Zia with a grin. She mentally asked the 5-D screen to slow down so she could make her selection. What was there on the menu? Hmmm... due to a shortage of meats, poultry and fish, side dishes had become the main course on dinner plates. Genetic engineering had produced cheaper, disease-resistant fruits and vegetables, which contained protein. The menu was filled with them: Roast Beef Potatoes, Chicken Noodles and Pork Chop Tasting Applesauce; the choice was broad. She also had the choice from meat extenders called "Zoorimi" like the new specialty Gater 'n Tater. Too bad this was not *halal* for Muslims.

She climbed down the couch sleepily, pointed her finger towards the blinds to clack them open for light. She reasoned with herself: *Why rely on these things when I have the best mood enhancer in the world: my body?* She sipped a mouth full of strawberries and blueberry punch with a mixer straw and shrugged her laziness off.

She moved the walls of the bedrooms farther in order to make some space and unfolded the rest of the telepresence apparatus hidden in the wall. It was time to go for a walk in the comfort of her own home. She then touched select a seaside landscape in her holographic simulator. The head sensor immediately activated as well as the treadmill underneath her feet. The wall seemed to zip open to a new world of immense beauty and calm. The panorama seemed very real; there was no blind spot where she could see any part of her condo's interior anymore. She stepped into the virtual reality and decided to change her dress to an exotic outfit as well as change the color of her eyes and the length of her hair. It wasn't practical to have long hair in real life, but it felt good to feel it floating in the ocean breeze. Besides, she looked stunning with straight deep auburn hair instead of her curling brown hairdo. Her feet could feel the warmth and

the texture of the sand only because the machine impressed the idea in her brain. Soon, she started running.

Buzz!

She was suddenly jerked out of her comfort zone by a buzzing sound coming from next door.

“What on earth is that?” she exclaimed.

Buzz!

Soon after, a door unzipped and she heard voices. She settled down. *Just the neighbor*, she thought.

Then she heard the door next door buzzing again.

“Not again!” She sighed.

She cracked open her blinds and saw a man coming towards her house. To her amazement, she saw more customers coming to her neighbor’s condo. What on earth was happening? What were they looking for next door? As they came in, the next condo’s door buzzed and buzzed again.

“*Enough!*” screamed Zia inwardly. She did not know what caused the interference, but it was downright annoying.

Did this Sikh guy have a practice across her threshold? Surely he needed a work license for that. True, many people had their office in their homes nowadays, but that was a little bit too much coming and going to Zia’s taste.

Buzz again. She fell on her bottom at the edge of the sofa. *My God, they are all guys!* She thought in bewilderment. *Where are all these men coming from? I can’t believe my eyes! It looks like a secret society or something. Men, men and again men. I have never seen so many men in one place ever in my whole life! Am I going crazy or what?”*

Guys or no guys, she had to take courage and confront them. Before she decided what to do, she went to the elevator and checked if the lock was operative. It was on. She couldn't risk to see them barge in, in case some of these men got lost in the attic and ended up in the wrong condo. She shivered, *O my God*, she thought, *I'm so scared! But I don't need to... I really need to talk to these guys at one point or the other, or else I'll go insane!*

She grabbed a light weight tunic and dressed quickly. She stepped outside. The air smelled acid and moist and felt quite sticky. Someone was approaching, visibly a professional with a slick outfit.

"Hi!" she said with confidence. "Are you our new neighbor?" she lied in order to see his reaction. "I did not have a chance to say hello." He cast down his eyes, quickly set the buzzer on and turned his back on her. The door unzipped and he disappeared in the apartment.

The attic is a mess

The next day, Zia was supposed to meet Maymoona and Nooria at the High. Maymoona did not take Zia too seriously when she explained all that had happened on the phone. She was already imagining sleeping double-shift with Maymoona, but, to her terror, she had to stay alone all night in a house surrounded with strange men. Maymoona was at a friend's house that night and did not come back because of the acid rain. Zia was mortified. How could she do this to her? "Call me if you are in any real danger," she had concluded before hanging up the phone. She wished her friend wasn't that pragmatic. Fortunately, Zia heard no sound that night. She could not sleep at first, but finally she dozed off on the couch until morning.

She woke up too late to attend her elective classes. She missed most of her classes, but Maymoona and Nooria would be waiting for her at the High. The High was the most logical place to meet. Since Maymoona was now using the roof of their condo to park her Subair, they had to put away things, and sort them out. The boxes could not just lie around. Nooria was needed to help put away her own stuff.

After her work, Nooria joined Maymoona and Zia in the Subair for a ride to their condo; her own vehicle was remotely following behind. The Subair lifted up in the air and soon enough reached its destination.

Upon arriving, they were already debating something. It was refreshing to confide in friends.

Nooria declared, concerned, "I don't know, there is never enough space in our place. Every time something comes up on the market I feel like I have to have it. I have extra light bullet proof vests just in case, whip weapons that flash energy fields, amphibious shoes in case of a flood, levitation beds, interior walls that can be turned into different shapes and transparency

frequencies to catch sound waves, dream recorder projector inflatable domes, and so on and so forth. This life is so scary, you know, I know, we know. It's like I need to fill up my space to feel protected. At least, that's how I excuse my shopping frenzy."

"Same here," declared Maymoona, "except that we do recycle everything. My mom and I are the condo sale fairies in our neighborhood back home."

"Yeah, you guys like gadgets, that's true. Who doesn't? Everything is so cheap and so available!" declared Zia. "It's quite common, you know. I guess I prefer to borrow things rather than buying them; our space is so small..."

"Good for you," said Nooria thoughtfully.

They soon parked the Subair on the terrace and climbed down the vehicle. It was chilly outside and Nooria followed heavily by Maymoona walked briskly towards the attic. Zia stooped them, holding on to their arms.

Zia said abruptly, preventing Maymoona from stepping down into the attic. "There's something I must tell you."

The girls froze and nodded. Maymoona seemed exhausted and fidgeted.

"So?" she asked impatiently.

"Well, it's kind of hard to say, May," started Zia sitting on the stairs and inviting her friends. Maymoona felt relieved and obliged happily.

Zia continued, "When we first moved in, we kept minimum storage up here. Didn't we, May? Basically, take the elevator, shove a box or two in and be done with it, without going into the actual attic."

Maymoona nodded with a grin.

"I remember that," said Nooria with a crooked smile.

“Then we started having problems with the neighbor across the street. She parked in our driveway and all. So May started parking on the roof. Of course, we have to go through the attic to go to the terrace where the Subair is waiting. At first, I did not pay any attention to the attic. We often come back home late, it is dark in here, and we aren’t interested in the stuff anyway.”

Nooria eyed her with a look of disapproval.

Zia said apologetically, “I’m sorry Nooria, well, it’s stored above our heads, you know...”

“Come on, Zia,” complained Maymoona. “How long are you going to take to tell her? I’m freezing here.”

Zia laughed nervously, patting the back of her head in embarrassment.

Zia hesitated, “Listen Nooria.”

And then she got quickly to the facts, “Well, when you asked us to look for a few things that you might need the other day, we found ourselves needing some things from up there too, and we made our first real venture into the place. Turns out... all of our attics are connected! I mean, our attic, the neighbor’s attic, the neighbor’s neighbor’s attic, connected! Like, you could go from my attic straight to Anne’s, two houses away simply by walking!”

Nooria looked alarmed, “Really? Is that so?”

Zia nodded.

Maymoona continued for her, “Yep. No doors or dividers or anything, easy access. We were totally creeped out by this. See, how can we ever be the same again?!... knowing that someone, like a pervert, could easily get from one house to another without ever being seen and without leaving any evidence behind, really.”

Nooria did not pay attention to more. She exclaimed, outraged, “O my God, Zia. That’s horrible! That’s why you installed the digital lock in your condo? I wonder if, when the attics

were built, that was a fire escape strategy?? Wishful thinking, I know...”

Maymoona confirmed, “I don’t know what can be done about personal safety in our units.”

Zia nodded assent, then added, a little embarrassed, “I did not want to tell you, but... er, there’s worse.”

“Worse? What could be worse? But let’s all get in before May gets pneumonia.”

“Thanks, nurse,” replied Maymoona amused and shivering in her heated sweater. They all stepped down and the warmth in the attic was comforting and reassuring; it emanated from the walls where carbon captors collected energy from the wind and friction engendered by their movements. A few snowflakes started to fall over the clear summer afternoon, grey and cold snowflakes.

Zia stopped and hesitated before giving them more details, “Okay, I’ll tell you the rest, but May, go downstairs and lie down, you look exhausted.”

Maymoona refused and sat on a box that was visible on the light path coming from the glass door.

Zia continued, “You see, yesterday night, I heard noises upstairs and I decided to look around and when I went up here, all of the boxes were destroyed. Not by an animal, clearly by a person!!! The tape was neatly cut, things were unwrapped and removed... some stuff was set up, others lay broken. I just scrambled down the ladder, shut the door and immediately called the local patrol.”

“Really?” said Maymoona surprised.

“Yeah, a super nice gal,” explained Zia. “She came right over, and went up there to look around some more... She couldn’t find anything aside from the destruction.”

“What did she say?” inquired Maymoona worried.

“Remove all the storage from the attic, period.”

“Really?” asked Nooria a little bit shocked. “Why would anyone be interested in a pack of junk?”

Zia said, “I have no idea who did that, but... you know, that Sikh...”

Maymoona scoffed at her, “He might be weird, but that does not qualify him as a thief.”

“Of course, I do not know for certain and I would never accuse him of anything.”

“Gosh! I feel bad for you gals...,” said Nooria appalled. “And I was thinking my problems were bad! I’m so ashamed... Definitely make sure the lock is secure 24 hours a day!”

“I don’t know,” Zia informed the girls, “The patrol said she was sure with enough blunt force someone could easily break the lock if he was trying to get into the house from the attic. So, if a grown man was stomping down on it, eventually *anything* would just give out.”

“Right, but at least you would hear it,” said Nooria reassuringly.

Silence fell in the attic. They did not try to switch on the light. They both looked out the door that was becoming brighter and brighter due to the accumulation of snow.

Finally, Nooria snapped out of it and exclaimed brightly, “It doesn’t mean anything. I mean, if you try to get to know your neighbors, they might be less inclined to rip you off. That’s also part of the reason “team building” is so important... In our place, we have a team building organization. We’re building trust, and creating our own neighborhood within our small number of units. I’m not saying nothing bad will happen... but it’s good to be surrounded by people you know have your back covered.”

“No way this will happen here,” declared Zia, although the idea was starting to germinate in her mind. “But why not a building watch? I told the patrol we would go to the Neighborhood

Patrol Meeting and complain... Maybe they could build walls or something up there to section us off from each other. But, I don't know what she is going to do because every time we report something she only says she is going to think about it. I don't know what the code is in this case, aside from it being a potential hot bed of crime. And, the person who used to live next door was very creepy and the new one is not even better. Not in a menacing way, although he did give me a good scare the first time I saw him... Everybody in this block is more along the lines of someone with issues. I am not "afraid" of anyone in general terms... but people are so odd you can never really let your guard down with them a hundred percent. And knowing that the new neighbor is using this space in the attic creeps me out some, let's be honest."

Nooria caressed the side of Zia's cheek in a maternal way, overwhelmed by her discovery.

She said, "I think if it really creeps you out, and given the history you and your neighbors have with the weirdoes, you should go to the landlady and say something about it. It doesn't sound like it's a code thing to me. In fact, when I lived in a similar development, we had our own dedicated space with four walls. There's no reason not to have walls unless they were lazy, or they wanted to ensure adequate air circulation, ventilation. If it's the latter, then I'm inclined to think that the attic space isn't properly vented, which could cause problems down the road if walls were put up without the problem being rectified."

"Or they wanted to save money," hinted Maymoona, always practical.

"That too."

They switched on the light and looked around.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Nooria. It was worse than what she had imagined. It seemed like all the boxes had been dumped on the floor and played with.

“It looks like this person was playing around or did not know what she was doing,” she exclaimed in surprise. “Or someone kept stepping on the stuff in the dark.” As she said that, She put one hand in front of her mouth in horror.

“You’re right, Nooria,” exclaimed Maymoona. “In that case, it’s not so bad, right?”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Nooria. “That’s a mystery.”

“Yeah, really puzzling,” declared Zia, “but right now I just want to get rid of all this mess. I am tired of tripping over stuff up here. Would you help me, sis? May, you’d better get some rest.”

Maymoona soon disappeared in the elevator’s box and they began sorting things out one at a time.

The neighbor' case

After a few hours of work, Nooria and her sister Zia went downstairs for good, and Maymoona, who was resting in the living room, soon served them coffee flavored vegetarian drinks. The girls stuffed their mouths with the metabolism booster snacks with little munching sounds, feeling very hungry after all the physical work. And they sipped their drinks in silence. They were very thirsty after all the excitement and exercise, moving the boxes down to the dining room and sorting out things. They put their feet up upon the levitating cushions and relaxed.

After a while, Zia declared mysteriously, "I don't get my next door neighbors."

"Huh?" exclaimed the two other girls in surprise.

She continued stroking her forehead, thinking intensely, "I mean, what reasonable, legal reason my new neighbor could have for having fifteen or so visitors over the course of the day every day?"

"Does he?" asked Nooria stunned, sitting back up a little bit and looking very interested.

Maymoona lifted an eyebrow. *Oh, no, this isn't going to be Zia's theories again?* She thought bored. *This girl should not be allowed to think anymore.*

Zia knew exactly what her roommate was thinking. She added quickly, raising her hands up defensively, "I know, I sound obsessive, but I share the hallway with them and I'm just a female, you know... their door is directly across from mine..."

"How would you know that, about the visitors?" said Maymoona very surprised; these neighbors have arrived only a few weeks ago."

"I did not pay attention at first," explained Zia stretching her sore muscles. "I sure do not have anything to do with them, but I first noticed the visitors because each time their door opens,

our door settles because of the air pressure change. You couldn't notice, May, you were so busy lately. I am home often and I noticed. The first days, I thought, hey, they are moving more stuff in, great! However, the frequency hasn't changed. Listen, pals, I have not sat at my peephole and watched each person go in and out, but I admit, periodically, I will get up and take a gander; it seems to always be a different person coming in, and each person HAS A KEY! I have seen at least fifteen separate individuals with keys."

Maymoona sighed deeply and said as a matter of fact, "Ask them about it. If you don't feel comfortable with that, then ask the landlord to look into it. They did not bother me a bit." She humored, "At least they are not after UFOs..."

Zia smiled.

Nooria sat anxiously in front of her. She reached her hands and said passionately, "Go with your guts, Shishie. Something doesn't seem right. I've had friends experience similar events. In each situation it has involved the distribution of drugs."

"Calm down girls," Maymoona enforced while moving around her straw, sipping every corner of her glass. "I think you're filling in the blanks where you shouldn't. If he's creating a nuisance based on the amount of noise this creates, then it's an issue, otherwise..."

Nooria shook her head, "If things are as you describe them, I don't think you're overreacting, Shishie. I think you're justifiably suspicious. My first thought was that the guy's a drug dealer, but everyone having a key makes that highly unlikely. I can't think of a terribly good explanation that fits all the facts, though." She looked a little frightened.

Zia asked anxiously, holding her sister's hands in hers, "What should we do?"

"I don't really know."

"See, we have no evidence of wrongdoing, so calling the police will get us nowhere. I

originally thought drug dealer, too, but then why rent a huge corner apartment when a four hundred square feet condo is available right around the corner at less than half the price? That is my rationale at least.”

Maymoona asked as she was helping herself on the high tech engineered carrots and celery, “What do they look like?”

“Neat, very neat, and upper class looking.”

“Maybe they are Mormons?” She said detached, one arm tucked under the other.

“Highly unlikely. I have never seen Mormons wearing turbans,” assessed Nooria with a pout.

“Hmm. Got a point here.”

They all thought for a while, and then Maymoona yawned, saying, “I find the whole thing vicariously exciting. I really hope things work out for you.”

Zia looked at her in dismay. After all, they were sharing the same condo! She felt upset at her best friend’s cynicism, but she kept her mind open; she was not making things up.

Nooria still entertained by the idea declared thoughtfully, “Maybe it’s a courier service. Have you tried reverse lookup for his phone number? However, couriers look pretty distinctive.”

Maymoona stood up and walked around the room, mumbling to herself. “It just doesn’t make sense, and it sounds like you all are trying too hard to come up with a nefarious explanation for this behavior,” exploded Maymoona. She did not like accusations because she had suffered her share of racism.

She burst out, “That might be a mail drop. I once had a landlady that did this. People who, for whatever reason, I never asked, didn’t want to disclose their real address, or needed an address-of-convenience, gave her address instead. For a fee, she collected, or kept their mail until

they came to get it. Resulted in lots of strangers turning up at all sorts of odd times. You might wonder why they wouldn't just get a PO Box or something, but some folks have their reasons for keeping things... unofficial. Doesn't necessarily explain everyone having a key, unless it's the same key hidden somewhere outside, of course. And this is pure speculation.”

Nooria ignored that. She jumped as stroke by a lightning, “Guys! I’m hooked! I know, he’s a bookie. He's a bookie!”

“The bookie idea crossed my mind too,” confirmed Zia while taking the dishes to the recycling bin.

“Wait!” Nooria added, jumping up and down. “I forgot about that, but I once visited a friend who lived in a place where the elderly couple in the flat below us had a very similar pattern of visitors, some of whom had keys, and I too wondered what on earth was going on. I was actually starting to think they were running some sort of brothel!” She chuckled. “It turns out that they worked for a small charity, and their fellow charity workers were dropping off collections and picking up leaflets, and such.”

“That’s brilliant,” Zia exclaimed somewhat reassured, “but would you give charity to a Sikh? I mean it’ not like their community is very large.”

“Anyways,” advised Nooria, “try to talk to these people. Squeeze a little bit of juice out of him.”

“Okay, I’ll try,” said Zia, “I’ll try...” and she began planning in her head.

Nooria picked up her light jacket and the box closest to her.

“Okay Shishie, time for me to go. Phil will be home soon and you know how he is...” said Nooria with a grin. “He detests finding out I was having fun outside.”

“We know...” said Maymoona knowingly. She did not really like Phil; he was too dandy for her, and she did not like the way he treated Zia’s sister. “You’d better get going now.”

“If you could help me put these boxes in my vehicle, that’d be cool. Rest now, May. Won’t you, Zia?”

“Of course. By the way, you promised to meet me at the TIMnasium tomorrow, remember?”

“Sure. Get my keys, will you?”

“Sure thing.”

“*Salam*, May. I’ll see you at the clinic on Monday, okay?”

“It depends... Do you have to run more tests? The baby is starting to complain.”

“Yes, I’m afraid May,” Nooria grinned from ear to ear. “The last ones. But after that, she’ll be done, I promise.”

“Glad to hear that. See ya then.”

“*Assalam alaikum*, May.”

“*Samo, samo*,” answered May with her hand waving in the air.

Totally Worth It

Nooria entered the medical facility in a flash. She just had a call from May, her sister's roommate; the girl had been rushed to the clinic. She immediately dialed Zia's cell.

Zia was in the parking lot of the gymnasium when her sister Nooria called her. Her voice seemed very anxious.

"Zia!... Zia?..."

What could have happened? Maybe their parents... Were they ill? Did any of them fall and break bones? Zia caught herself by lying on her vehicle.

She allowed the communication, and her sister's voice blurted out, "Zia, you've got to come to the clinic right away."

"The clinic?!" she exclaimed, feeling very confused. "What happened, Nooria?"

"It's May. She is having her baby right now. I'm on my way. She just called me."

"Wait!" yelled Zia panicking and squatting to regain her balance. "Is she delivering, or is she in labor?"

Nooria's voice felt pressing, "I think she is in labor, but that's way too early."

Zia hesitated before asking, worried, "What are the chances?"

"The baby should deliver okay, God help us, but we cannot forecast everything."

"Do you mean... she may be in danger?"

"I don't know, Zia. I pray that she is not. By any rate, I need someone she knows to stay next to her. I will be shifting around the whole night."

"I'm on my way," answered Zia, stunned.

While she rushed to the midwife's practice, Nooria thought about her evening. She could not help feeling she was cheating time on her husband. As a professional, she felt very lonely, and as a woman, she felt misunderstood. It was hard for a Muslim female to have a married life, and a professional life. That would be a sleepless night far away from home. And Phil did not like that. He was supposed to listen to her needs, but she was supposed to give him precedence. Phil really tried to be patient, but sometimes he clearly did not have it in him.

Nooria turned Phil's words upside down in her head until the idea did not make sense anymore, "I hope it is worth it!"

Was it really worth it? A moment of doubt crossed her mind.

He had also said to her in anger before she left, "I really do not understand why you like spending so much time in the maternity while you cannot have children yourself. You punish yourself?"

She thought, *Punishing myself for what? That's ridiculous. Punishing myself for something I have no power over? I am not yet insane.*

"Work is something to do," she had finally said.

Not worth it?

She tried to forget the feeling of profound frustration by focusing on the Women's Centered Care. This way, she could escape her problems for a few hours. Being a maternity nurse, yes, she was around babies all the time, but it did not bother her. Babies were her passion.

She hurried towards Maymoona's yard.

"*Salam*, May. How is this baby doing?"

May was rolling on a big ball, trying to open up her pelvis, but cramps let her breathless.

She just had the strength to raise her hand in the air. Nooria caught it, and listened to her pulse.

Maymoona was finally able to utter, “You tell me.”

“Did the intern midwife check you?” she asked her patient. The young woman blew deeply, stiffened and then relaxed gradually. The contraction was over for now, until the next two or three minutes apart.

“Yes, she did. First thing first. The baby’s vitals are normal and I’m good.”

Nooria checked her friend’s chart and noted something.

“What happened to you, May?” asked Nooria very concerned. “Do you recall anything?”

“Well... aarrgh,” moaned the girl, feeling her belly squeezed again in a circle of pain. She blew air again and tried to relax more. Finally, it was over, and she could finish her sentence.

“There was this shooting, you know, at the High, someone playing with fireworks as it turned out, and I ran. I bumped into something... Since that day on, I was not feeling totally all right. I guess this baby thought it was probed to see her mom... aarrgh...”

The contractions were quite close to each other now, but not enough; they still had to wait for the climax before her body would be ready for delivery.

It’s her first baby, thought Nooria expertly. She might have half an hour or so. I need to go check on my next patient. She looked anxiously at the parking lot through the huge window. I wish Zia were already here.

“I’ll be right back, May. Hold on. You are doing just fine. Zia is on her way and will be with you shortly.”

She smiled warmly and Maymoona smiled back but it looked more like a rictus.

When she came into the room to meet Connie, her next patient, she was greeted with a bashful smile.

“How are you today, Connie? I’m midwife Nooria,” she said cheerfully, reading the name out of the chart.

“Holding it,” said the woman freely. Then she added weakly, “Nice name you have.”

“Thanks, Connie. Are you excited about this baby? How are you parents doing? Are they here with you?”

The girl hesitated. Nooria looked up again at the electronic chart. *Oh*, thought Nooria taken aback, *she is a surrogate mother!* She suddenly understood how much this girl was going through, being alone and not mature enough to assume her little one. Did she need money that much? She wondered why she was not accompanied by anyone, at least by the surrogate parents? Was it an illegitimate child or a carefully planned pregnancy? She wondered what the girl would do with her baby now. Some mothers decided to keep their babies, but most fulfilled their contract. Most girls that age just left their newborn at the clinic, and never asked for it again. It was a tragedy. If she took the baby home with her, this would be tough for her.

Nooria tried to think about something else. None of her business. She focused on the girl. She knew that she could make a difference here, even though at home she was powerless to bring peace and harmony. Here, she was a daily hero. She saved lives sometimes, and sometimes she saved the day, like she could today. That was a great relief to think she meant something for someone else, even if it was only for a few hours. It gave her hope, and pride.

It was time to induce. The girl had not made any progress in a few hours, and she was a few days past due. Nooria checked the intravenous pump and the electronic fetal monitor that told how the baby was doing, then declared, “I’ll be back in 15-minute, Connie, to check on you.

The contractions should start to come in faster and stronger.”

“All right, Nooria.”

Nooria blinked at her, “Hang in there...”

The night nurse interrupted her. She was holding a new chart.

“Nurse Nooria? I’m sorry to intrude, but can you take on another patient?”

Nooria hesitated. That would make three, and she had to pass quickly from one room to the other.

The nurse insisted, “The doctor has had a last minute constraint, and he will be late. We can rotate your patients, and put their cubicles back to back so that there will be less running around for you.”

Nooria nodded, “All right, but I’m out as soon as the doctor gets in. Understood?”

The nurse was more than happy to accommodate; she did not want to have the responsibility in case anything would happen. Risks were daily professional situation for Nooria; she could assume them; she was expected to assume them.

She had never seen the girl in the next room. *This is going to be hard, she thought, this girl is alone, and I am a complete stranger, and... hmm... she is fifteen!*

The nurse quickly pivoted the three rooms Nooria was in charge of now, and followed her from room to room.

She moved swiftly, aware that Nooria would be needing her help soon.

The teenager was pushing for quite some time. Nooria examined her. She was getting there, but it was slow, slow, slow...

Nooria bit on her lower lip. She was concerned that the doctor would show up all at once and

would speed up the process unnecessary to gain time.

She sat next to the girl, turned her to the side, massaged her back, and talked to her for a few minutes.

“Should I start the antipain medication now, dear?”

The girl shook her head. Beads of transpiration were dripping along her temples and were drenching her hair. The very young teen grabbed Nooria’s arm, then spitted out, alarmed, while breathing heavily, almost out of breath,

“I don't want an IV. I really don't want anything until I ask for it. You understand?”

It was too much for the other nurse. She shrugged, helping the girl sponge her forehead,

“I warned you, baby, this is going to be painful. A lot of women are grateful to get pain killers. Think twice on this.”

Nooria intervened, shocked,

“It’s all right. It's her birth experience. It's her baby, and it's her way of doing things”

At this moment, the doctor shoot in and took all the nurse’s attention. *Pfeww*, thought Nooria. *It is high time, Mister Man*. She was ready to leave and go check on Nooria when she overheard the conversation.

The doctor said after having inquired about the last hour, “Who let her squat?”

The nurse answered, “She decided to do it; we could not make her change her mind.”

He had a look at the patient, and then said, “Go ahead. Put her up!”

Nooria stopped in her tracks. *Bad listener*, she thought inwardly. *That’s the type who doesn’t care. He wants the nurse to put the patient on her back when she has back pain? Unbelievable! I’ve got to do something, even if it costs me my license.*

The teen was now looking at her intently, her eyes almost desperate. Nooria thought

some more, and then she approached the nurse while the doctor was away, sanitizing.

She said, her hands on her hips and trying to calm her tone of voice, “This is going to be problematic. I talked to her before; I know she is highly concerned with modesty and her back hurts.”

She had a second look towards the girl who looked frightened.

“If you put her up in those leg stirrups, she is going to lose it.”

She helped the teen to the chair, and then suddenly declared, “I’m going to put you up in those little low foot things and pull this cover over you. Would that be all right?”

The young girl started to panic.

“Please don’t. Aghh, I can’t,” she said with a grimace. The baby was about to crown; she was certain of that. She acted quickly, knowing that the girl was feeling a lot of pressure on her lower back now.

“All right, then. I will put your bed back together. Turn on your side, you’ll feel more comfortable.”

She turned back and told the physician who was coming back from the sanitation, “We’re not putting her up. She’s going to have to deliver in the bed, squatting.”

“Okay by me,” said the doctor, surprised a nurse midwife would stand up to him. “You are responsible.”

The last thing Nooria wanted to be was responsible, but that was her idea after all, and this lame doctor did not want to have any part of it.

Nooria took off to go see Maymoona.

Zia was already there and May’s labor was progressing the way Nooria had foreseen it

progress. She helped her to the bathroom. She went close to the girls, and rubbed some essential oils on May's back and asked her to kneel and lean over the ball. Maymoona groaned, but felt better. Zia looked carefully at what Nooria had done and now was doing it too, relaying on her sister's knowledge. Nobody talked.

It was time for Nooria to rotate. She moved to Connie's alcove. Her doctor had arrived. The doctor's assistant was sponging her brow. Nooria saw the doctor look at his watch, looking impatient, and ready for the next task. The baby had crowned, and Nooria could see a patch of hair coming out. She knew that Connie was having a normal delivery with no complications, but the doctor was not going to wait for long. He probably had other things in his mind, and had probably seen the patient only a few times as required. No emotions involved here. And then, he commanded,

“Forceps.”

Nooria instantly walked to his side and exclaimed, taken aback, “Forceps, Doctor? Everything is going to where she can. With a little patience, or coaching, and some work, she could have a normal delivery.”

But she really thought, *Forceps? Are you out of your mind? There could be complications like brain damage. Ever heard of it, selfish oyster?*

“I am sorry, nurse Nooria. I have an intern with me. She needs to do that. At least, she won't have a cesarean.”

Nooria hushed in shock. She felt so bad she could not do anything for the poor girl.

She thought some more before leaving the room and prayed that the forceps would not cause any damage. She hung in there, holding to the separation between the alcoves, feeling

useless. *I wish I had more time to communicate with the girl, she thought inwardly. That's so discouraging. Shoot! The patient should have said no! It's her body, after all!*

She went to the next room where Maymoona and Zia were waiting. Maymoona was walking around now, leaning heavily on her friend. She hissed between her clenched teeth, but could not talk through her contractions.

Zia asked for her, "Does she need to see this doctor at all?"

Nooria asked, surprised, "What happened? What Doctor?"

Zia explained, upset, "Well, a doctor came in when you left. He put a fetus monitor on her as well as an IV, but May started unplugging it when he left the room. Since you were busy, I called the doctor back. He was not happy, I can tell you that. I told her these doctors have standing orders. Everybody gets an IV, everybody gets continuous monitoring. It is bad to resist. I mean... It is for her own good, isn't it?"

Nooria shrugged and put her hands on May's belly to feel the contractions. "You did good, May. Nothing to worry about." The contractions were closely spaced out now. The birth was imminent.

"Holding it, May? How are you feeling?"

"I'm... aghhh... fine," said Maymoona. Suddenly, the pressure on her belly and the pain went away. She was feeling now relieved and happy. "Is it over soon? I feel better all of a sudden. The baby is moving and ready to roll, I guess."

And then she grimaced again, holding her back. The pain had apparently come back, but milder, but he was tired. That was the climax Nooria was waiting for.

"Can I push, now, Nooria? Can I push? I feel like pushing," she asked hurriedly.

Nooria reassured her, “Good! Let me check now. Lie down. I need to see how you have progressed and take the baby’s heartbeat.”

After a few minutes, Nooria gave Maymoona the signal to push. Maymoona started pushing. The baby came out quickly.

Nooria smiled at the patient, and then declared, “It wasn't one of those that were willing to sit there and wait for you to push.”

She said kindly, “This baby looks exactly like you! She has such beautiful red hair, like you. It has so much red hair, and its eyes are just the same color as yours!”

For a moment, Nooria felt the urge to take the baby for herself and never let go. She did not even want to know whose baby that was. The little round mouth, and the innocent eyes of the baby lifted in her heart such envy, she could hurt herself for the desire of wanting it.

She cradled the infant in her arms, oblivious of the mother. For a few minutes, or a few seconds, time did not matter anymore, she felt like a mom with such a love overwhelming her, it took her mind away.

An insistent voice somewhere in the room said her name repeatedly, “Nooria, Nooria! Give the baby, please?”

Nooria shrugged herself and fell back to reality.

“I’m sorry, May.” And she put the baby on her friend’s chest.

Nooria felt relieved her sister was here to help May; she did not know how long she would be able to stay with them. She remembered the way Phil had let her go. She was due home soon.

She looked at Maymoona’s preemie. *This is the blessing, she thought, what makes marriage worth it. This baby is going to stay at the clinic for a few days; I’d better make sure it*

will be well taken care of. May looks happy. Why didn't her husband come with her, or her mom, any relative? Maybe one day she will tell us all about her situation. I hope so. It helps to get it out of one's chest. She smiled inwardly. She was the one with the problem, not May! She wanted others to confide in her, but she did not really advertise her own problems. She would have to go home tonight and face Phil again. She thought about her other patients. Not everybody wanted their babies. How cruel life was when one was fertile but another one dropped babies for the benefit of others and abandoned them. Why God made the world this way? She had to believe it was for a purpose. She just would have to go on doing what she was doing, and put her trust in Him.

Right now it seems that all the doors of communication are closed with Phil, but, who knows, another door I do not expect may still open up. God has made nests for little birds for them to rest; I will find my little nest soon enough. When I go home, I will tell him it is worth it. Holding this tiny life in my arms for a moment was worth it. It is the cutest moment. Nothing compares. He has to understand that.

Maymoona looked at Nooria with a worried look. Zia looked like she had something to say but did not know how to start.

“Nooria...,” she started with hesitation. “I think May has something special to ask you.”

“Sure. What is it May?”

Maymoona shoot a hurt look at Zia before explaining abruptly, “Zia is such a pain. I told her not to worry about us.”

“What is it?” said Nooria in alarm.

Zia took upon herself to explain while she put an arm around her friend, “See, Nooria, May was not supposed to deliver that early. She had kind of planned her delivery and it was supposed to come after her exams.”

Maymoona sighed, swallowed hard and decided to face Nooria with her request.

She said directly, “My niece is supposed to come live with me, but I just can’t take care of her, especially with my baby Mia in the hospital. I need to find someone to take her in until I’m ready for her.”

Nooria said, “Oh...” in surprise and things started to race in her head. “For... how long?”

“I’m not sure,” said Maymoona, visibly struggling with her decision, “at least for a few weeks, and I can’t spend all my time in the clinic either. I wish I could, but I’ve got to get this degree and move on.”

Zia squeezed her shoulders and urged Maymoona, but the young mother cast down her eyes and refused to talk.

Zia talked in her place, “Nooria, could you temporary adopt her niece?”

Nooria stepped back in shock. “What? Adopt May’s niece? Me? Are you sure?”

Maymoona stared at her and her expression spoke louder than words.

“Please!”

Suddenly hope started swelling in her chest, an incredible hope and a joy bigger than herself. It was slowly consuming her lungs and stretched an overwhelmed smile across her face.

Her eyes started to burn like a hot charcoal. She did not know what to say, but her eyes talked for her as a mist blocked her vision.

“I’ll take that as a Yes,” said Zia triumphantly.

“Me too,” exclaimed Maymoona with a satisfied look on her face.

“How old is she?”

“Hugh, fourteen.”

“Not really a little girl.”

“Thank you, Nooria. This way, I do not have to let her go with strangers and I know she will be well taken care of. And the best part is, I will be able to see her whenever I want. Won’t I, Nooria? ”

Nooria nodded assent, “Of course you will. Even if I have to chase you around, she will know her aunt. I do not know what to say. It’s me who wants to thank you. I know it is only temporary, but that will mean the world to me.”

“You’re welcome, Nooria,” answered Maymoona with humor. “I did all the work, you are just getting a crop full.”

“When is she coming?”

“In a few days.”

“So soon! I’m not sure I can be ready.”

“Don’t worry, Nooria, I’ll work out the details with Zia later.”

The Niece's Visit

A few days later, Zia was still in the daze of Maymoona's birth experience and felt truly elated. That had been the most beautiful and exciting event in her life so far and the after effects were still lingering on her. Zia decided to confront her scary neighbor in the hall of the building. It was worth trying to trust human kind one more time. Life was after all mysterious and full of hopes. Why not transferring some of it into her life?

If I decide to bypass my fear of strange men, she thought, I can do it. After all, he is just a person. I thought Muslims triggered all kinds of emotions, but I was forgetting that any religion has the same effect on other people. I should be more understanding.

With this in mind, she got ready to make small talk with the next doors'. She listened carefully for the door buzz before she unzipped her own door, and there he was, blocking the hallway with his extravagant height. *Ouch.*

"Hello," she said lightly. "Nice day today. By the way, I'm Zia. And you?"

The man looked like she was torturing him with hot poker when he answered, "Sure is" and he winced. *Very weird, Zia thought. He is not a people person. He did not even look me once in the eye. Does he want to hide something?*

She walked away with him, trying not to look like she was following him.

"Er... I'm a student. What do you do for a living? Are you professor?"

There was a slight chance of that, but she had to try to get his attention anyway.

"I... ahem... have my own business." He said looking at his feet and looking very busy and very imposing.

"Oh, that's neat..." She decided to try again and put out all her cards. She tried to smile and innocently asked, "Do you work from home? Many men do."

He said, “No,” and darted out.

How rude! Thought Zia. *Gee, I’m just a person, not a poison! I hope Elham I in a better mood.*

She waited outside for Maymoona’s cousin, Elham. The poor girl was scheduled to arrive the day her dad had asked her and Nooria to test the Virtual History lifeware. *I hope she will not be too bored,* thought Zia worried. Maymoona was still at the hospital. Too bad she wasn’t here to welcome her. Zia sighed. Well... We’ll make do.

At the clinic, Nooria was finishing testing Mia’s vitals when she remembered her dad had asked Zia and her to come to the lab.

“Shoot,” she told Nooria looking at the plasma clock. “I have to go to Dad’s lab. You can stay with Mia if you want. I’ll give the word to leave you alone with her.”

“I would appreciate that, Nooria. Thank you.”

Maymoona held her little daughter tighter in her arms and plucked a kiss over her eyes. She loved the feeling of this fleeting creature who was so trusting. She loved everything about her.

She told Nooria, “What do you do in the lab?”

“Oh, we’re testing a new lifeware. Dad is working on it with a new *imam*. I hear he is knowledgeable, so that will be a good thing, I think.”

“Yes, Zia mentioned him. Let me know how it is. Well, have fun.”

Nooria smiled, talked to the people in the intensive care unit and waved goodbye. She looked at Maymoona and her baby one more time, and her heart squeezed in her chest. In a few weeks, Maymoona would be taking Mia away. That hurt a little bit like a butterfly feeling in her stomach that settled there a little too long, but Nooria could control it and forced herself to think only about the present.

What was their dad up to this time? Last time he had invited Zia and her in his lab, they had to go through a series of body scans that lasted hours. They had exited the facility with sore joints and buzzing headaches. So, she was not too excited about this trip.

She took the elevator to another part of the building. She suddenly remembered she had to pick up the result for her husband's semen test. So much had happened lately, she had completely forgotten them. At least she was a nurse and she knew her way around the facility. That gave her the right to have access to her file without a doctor being present. That was a relief.

She arrived at the lab too late; her doctor had already picked up all the results that were there.

"Shoot!" she said again. Fortunately, he was still in his office, and he handed her a series of tests results. After that, he let her decide if she wanted him to explain them. She waved negatively, and grabbed the envelope. She was feeling depressed, which was not really like her, but she did not want anyone to see her going to pieces.

She jumped into her huge Limair and was swiftly air born. Her vehicle was so advanced, she literally jumped from one cloud to the other, and it took her just a few seconds to reach the lab.

She climbed out of her Limair and looked at the magnificent TIMnasium in the distance that glowed like a diamond with artificial lights and stars spangled all over it. She wondered, *People have built this gymnasium in the hope it would guide people back to the faith. Ow, was that necessary? There is so much darkness, it seems like there can never be enough to pull us all out of this opacity. But maybe people just need this light. I hope it works. I am just worried about all these loose knitted groups that meet only because there is a need, but a need without love. People have a hard time loving each other. That is so true. And what is faith? Faith is love for God, and the one who loves God, Allah makes his life secure. I have always believed that. However, if one cannot love people, can this person love Allah? I wonder. Dad used to teach us that worship is not so burdensome and difficult that the Muslim needs to have a rest from it. If it happens, then something is wrong.* She looked at the giant building again, and it felt like a mistake. *Beautiful buildings for empty hearts,* she thought. *That's what it looks like to me. I just hope I am wrong, dead wrong.*

She looked at her hands and a tear landed on one of them. *I am so sad,* she thought, *I see everything in black.* She picked up the envelope with the lab tests and wondered for a minute if she would incinerate it on her way to the basement. She shrugged and took it under her arm; she had time to decide.

She walked into the building and looked at the door closing back on its own swiftly. *I used to admire Dad for making up family traditions. One of them was Thank You Day,* she thought looking at the TIMnasium in the distance through the giant bay window. *Maybe, along the way, I forgot to be thankful to God? Since I forgot to be thankful, Allah is taking away the man I love.* She looked at herself in the window, not very pleased with what she saw. She saw a mid aged woman who looked more dead than alive. She had eaten her worries away and big circles ran

around her eyes for crying herself to sleep every night. Phil had taken his vacations without her. “You work,” he had said as an excuse, “and I need this.” The only place she felt alive now was at the clinic where she made a difference in people’s lives. Now she wished she were more like her mother, the traditional Muslim wife. Her mom was so perfect; nobody could even measure to her. But that was not for Nooria. Oh, no. Everybody loved her mother. *Oh, Mom*, she moaned, trying to muffle her cries. *I admired you most of my life. I admired how you would never criticize anyone and would never raise your voice. I admired that in you*, she thought painfully. *But this is not me. I cannot follow a man the way you followed yours. I admired you for being so much loved, for making Dad so happy, just as it should be. I admired you because a woman goes to heaven when she makes her husband happy. Nothing else is required from her. And yet, this is the most difficult task. Mom, I now know how much of your personal life you had to sacrifice to reach heaven. I could never do that. Funny how we always admire what we cannot be or what we cannot have. And we try to be what we envy, so we fail... always fail. Yes, Mom, I failed to make him happy and my place in paradise is barred.*

She felt alive out of the home. Marriage felt like being locked up, locked up in conflicting emotions, locked up in giveaways, and locked up in being the wife, not the person she wanted to be. She wanted to make a difference in people’s lives, not just raise children and feel modest. But she wanted the children too. She wanted to hold her children’s hands and hug them and show them her love, not put a barrier between her and life itself.

Outside, she was this butterfly out of its cocoon. At home, she was wrapped up in smiles and guilt. At home, she had stopped combing her hair, and just circled her bun with an elastic band. She was too sluggish to even tidy her new home, and dust accumulated here and there. Sending the cleaner robot was even too much of a task for her, and Phil had to think about it for her. *I*

think I do not care anymore, she said to herself. Whatever... What is the worse he can do anyway? I am through trying to be the perfect housewife. Women are too desperate to try to keep their man when they are lucky to have one.

She hurt at the idea that the test could be positive, and he would be diagnosed with low sperm count. That would make him hysterical. She turned around and walked to the elevator. This time, she was really going to be late for whatever her dad had in stock for them.

Nooria, she said to herself, looking into her hand mirror before entering the lab. Allah has created us only to worship him. Anything you are, your intelligence, your emotions, your health, everything is designed to serve Him. This is a hard trial, yes, but you can do it, you are strong enough. Sometimes lessons must be learned the hard way. Maybe you are loving the things of this world too much, and maybe you need to think more about the afterlife. Now, dry your tears and be cheerful. There always are silver linings in the sky, even in the year 3000, even under the acid rain, even in most dangerous places. Trust in Allah. There are always silver linings.

Before she entered the lab, she made sure she was presentable. She applied a firming cream around her eyes in order to stretch her puffy eyes. She also pinched the corner of her lips with sticky skins in order to give the impression of cheerfulness. Then, she drew the brim of her veil over her bosom, and pulled down her sleeves. She also made sure no part of her skin was visible, only her face and hands. Here... she looked like a sensible Muslim now, not like a little cork lost in the ocean and bubbling around.

The scanner checked her fingertips and readily allowed her inside the lab. Her head spanned for a few seconds because it was so dark inside. She hesitated. No, it was not dark; it was just that there was too much contrast between the bright corridor and the darker lab. It was

like entering into a cave with an opening at the top. The light was filtered somewhere on the ceiling. She did not know exactly where. And, in the middle of the light, she saw Zia and a young girl talking and laughing. She shook her head thinking she was imagining. Her dad was nowhere to be seen, but she knew he was probably in his office, behind the lab wall.

She approached the girls and had a good look at the teen. She had a great resemblance with Maymoona. But what were they doing? They had a boiler next to them and they slowly poured a solution in a dish. As they poured, the solution became... what?... Ice?!

That looked like fun. She approached them in silence and bent to touch the ice. To her surprise, it was warm to the touch. That was not ice. What kind of magic was that?

Zia turned toward her sister and greeted her, “*Assalam Alaikum*, Nooria.”

But Nooria was hypnotized by the sculpture. It was so strange and so pure, not like the brown ice they could see in the winter and sometimes in the summer when the weather was all mixed up. And it froze instantly!

Zia looked at her teasingly. She declared, “Hey, Nooria, we’re making magic! Want to try?”

Nooria looked at her sister disapprovingly, “Where did you find that? Is it dry ice?”

“Well, no. Clark showed us how to use it. It’s sodium acetate, not dry ice! This is so freaking cool!!!!!!!!!”

“Can you put your finger in there and freeze a finger?”

Suddenly, Clark came out from behind the lab wall and raised his hands in front of him, “No, Nooria, please don’t. This stuff is toxic when liquid.”

Zia stiffened. She was debating how she was supposed to act around him. He was the only man she really knew. The only stranger she talked to. Her new neighbor and her friends were hard to figure out and she was trying to make comparisons. Maybe all men were the same and she could understand them through Clark. Her dad was a dad, so he didn’t count.

She said to the kid, “Okay, lab partner. See you in a week. Your escort is here.”

The girl did not reply, but she turned towards Nooria and stared at her. Nooria had forgotten about Elham. *O my God, how did that happen?* She thought in a panic.

“Don’t sweat it,” said the girl picking up her things and walking out the lab, “I’m used to it. I’ll wait outside.”

Clark put away the chemicals while Zia looked at her hands, still sitting and embarrassed by his proximity. It was taking too long for Clark to remove it all. Nooria looked at the lab assistant from the corner of her eyes. Wow, he looked happy! She had hard time believing that was the same Clark she had known all her life. From time to time, he looked towards the entrance where Elham was disappearing. She smiled at him in encouragement. Clark beamed and said happily,

“Hello, Nooria. How’s it going?”

Nooria laughed despite herself. He was really cheerful, and the ice between them was definitely broken. Where was the shy lab assistant who used to greet them so politely? She must have missed something.

“Hey, Clark,” she replied amused.

He nodded and left; his blond hair smoothly tidy on his head, and a spotless lab vest hanging low.

“Amazing,” said Nooria to her sister in a low voice.

“Yep, I liked the idea.”

“I mean, Clark!” said Nooria while leaning forward in a conspiratorial tone.

“What?” asked Zia indifferently.

Nooria shrugged, and sat down next to her sister who was taking notes.

“What were you doing with May’s niece?”

“My new patient,” said Zia absorbed by her notes.

“Really?” said Nooria in amazement. “Since when have you become a professional?”

“Oh, you know, I’ve been doing all this training in the lifewares, and Dad says I’m ready, so I took my chances.”

“Really?” said Nooria, opening her eyes wide and reclining on her chair to study the situation.

“Is this something to do with May? Did she ask you to?”

Zia lifted up her face to glare at her sister, “Of course she did. The girl is having issues with computer addiction.”

Nooria cast down her eyes and replied, detached, “Yeah, they all seem to have the same issue. She’ll fit right in with Clark...”

She then leaned across the table; her hands clasped together and looked at Zia from below.

“I hope he is on your list too.”

Zia laughed under cover and jokingly elbowed her sister.

Nooria regained her serious and asked, “I was wondering,” she said with a puzzled look on her face. “Why were you making fake ice with this kid?”

“Oh, that? Well, I asked Clark if he had anything fun to do during our session. I guess that lighted a bulb in his head because, a few minutes later, he came up with this stupendous experiment. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Hmm,” said Nooria unconvinced. She thought, *Looks like he was trying to impress someone.*

Zia paused, and then looked at her sister sideways before adding, “This is the girl you are going to live with.”

“I know,” answered Nooria with a worried look on her face.

Zia pulled her sister’s sleeve and said convincingly, “Cool it down, sister. I just thought this kid needed help having fun. She is quite nice, really.”

“Great. I need someone nice around for a change.”

Nooria lifted her hand up and shuffled Zia's bandana.

"Ouch, ouch," cried Zia while putting her hands over her head and laughing out loud.

Nooria teased her a little bit more before their dad came out of his office.

"*Salam*, girls. This will take a little bit more time. I'll call you when we're ready."

Zia flinched, but Nooria looked at her with a knowing smile.

"So," asked Nooria, "what was this ice thing all about? If having fun with your client was all that is necessary to solve her problems, that'd be incredible, but I doubt this is going to be sufficient."

Her voice trailed off as she waited for her sister to answer.

"Okay, Nooria, since I cannot hide anything from you... and you want the technical stuff... Here goes. Research shows that the thought processes required in playing computer and video games do not properly stimulate the frontal lobe of the brain. Thus, the brain does not form proper amounts of serotonin, the chemical the body uses for self-control. So, by pouring the liquid, I was making her practice body control and patience."

"Interesting," said Nooria with a finger on her cheek. "That's it! You must really hate video games..."

Zia grinned, and rubbed her eyes before continuing, "No, that's not it. And I guess, yes, I'm a lot prejudiced against video games. I never liked them for myself anyways."

"So, you're saying..." Nooria said placing one hand on the table and tapping it lightly.

Zia wiggled a little bit in her chair and smoothed out her bandana to make double sure it fit over her hair.

“Well, growing kids need more than just to stare at the 5-D screen in order to have a healthy brain.”

“Really?”

“In fact, sitting young kids in front of the simulator denies them the three most critical factors involved in their development: movement, touch and connection to other humans. If healthy development is not fostered, we’re turning out broken children. That’s what happened to this kid. His parents used the simulator as a baby sitter, so she is pretty damaged, but, thanks God, it is not irreversible.”

“Interesting,” said Nooria. “So you were reeducating her using hands on?”

“You got it, Nooria. Well, well, it shows that you were not raised by a computer.” She grinned.

“Yeah,” said Nooria gravely. “You would know about this.” She winked at her sister. “I guess the whole society is giving children golden tickets to misery...”

“I don’t want to frighten you, Nooria, but video games are very stressing on the child’s mind, that’s why we have so many child psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, attention deficit, suicidal responses and bipolar disorder, and more...”

“I know,” said Nooria thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that one before. Now, Zia, you have become plain scary. I do not think I want to hear more.”

“The whole world wishes they would not have to hear more. That’s the problem, Nooria. And then, we’ve got a society stunted at the core. That’s why Dad is so much into these hands on lifewares.”

Zia reinforced her words by tapping the table surface several times with the edge of her palm.

Nooria squinted.

“He is trying to remedy the problem, isn’t he?” confirmed Nooria.

“Yeah.”

“Since we cannot erase our world of computers, let’s create a virtual reality to become our reality. Yippee!” said Nooria mockingly.

“That’s pretty much it,” said Zia looking defeated. “We’re screwed, I know. That’s why the end is so near. When we reach the bottom, there is only one way we can go, isn’t it? And it’s up.”

“Maybe...,” thought Nooria deeply, “but we are pretty good screwed up right now.”

A mask of pain suddenly appeared on her face. She knew about the bottom. She was in it. She started playing with the hanging parts of her scarf, her favorite passtime it seemed these days then settled down.

Zia clipped her notebook to her dress and looked around to see what their dad was doing. She met Clark’s eyes and immediately cast hers down and turned around. Nooria watched her in

silence. That made her even more uncomfortable. She tapped her fingers on the table, fidgeting in her chair, and finally said, as if to make conversation,

“What do you think of the way parents act around kids, Nooria? I mean, you see plenty of parents in your work, first hand parents. What do you think parents do wrong?”

“Well,” thought Nooria with a deep frown creasing her forehead, “our parenting shortcuts are rewiring the kids’ brains in an enormous way. You just proved this to me. The more frequent exposure to the screen, any screen, is training their brains to have short attention spans in real world situations that do not supply instant gratification. With technology taking over the households and providing parents with solitary tasks and self-contained activities not requiring socialization, the home unit is crumbling. People have zero minutes of meaningful conversation with their kids.”

“I just can’t imagine that. Mom was always all over us. I cannot imagine how the other kids do without communicating with their parents.”

“Isn’t it obvious, Zia? Don’t you see it at school? Kids do not think anymore; they just vomit. To talk, first of all you have to have something to say.”

Zia shifted in her chair and looked around to see if the men were done. Clark looked up and smiled. Zia jerked back.

She said, “Kids nowadays are very knowledgeable. Toddlers can handle new computers intuitively. Preschoolers surf the web like pros...”

Nooria pulled her sister’s chin to attract her attention.

She declared, “Sure children can tell you the latest technologies or the latest programs, but once they are unplugged, what do they have to say?”

“Right, Nooria,” said Zia thinking about the kid she was counseling. “This girl unplugged herself from the simulator. She had never done that before. When she did that, she told me, she suddenly did not see the purpose of life anymore and she started hanging around with bad girls. Good thing May’s sister agreed to send her here. Maybe we can help.”

“Oh, every adult’s gripe about youth can basically be explained by the tech world. I swear, Zia.”

Zia touched her forehead and lingered there for a while. She finally explained, “But you know, Nooria, these frontal lobes in the brain, they are responsible for judgment, perspective, ability to delay gratification, predict outcomes. Well, in these kids, the frontal lobes are underdeveloped. Dad showed me this last time.”

“Hmm, that’s probably why he let you council this kid in his lab. Come to think of it, he probably wants to see if the kid can grow them back.”

“But..., Nooria? I wonder about this girl. She is so lame; it is not normal.”

“You ask?” exclaimed Nooria with a start. “I’m surprised, Zia. Come on, think. Playing on virtual realities stunts frontal lobes growth, right, or even shuts down the frontal lobes completely? So, well, they do not grow a personality!”

“Yes, kids are immature, you’re right, and they stay immature even in their adult lives. They live in today-present time. They have no care for the future and when they do, they lose it.

Result? Elham... Ugh. Chilling,” said Zia with a big grimace on her face. “I’m glad we were homeschooled.”

Their dad suddenly joined them at the table. He seemed to have followed part of the conversation. He scratched his beard and asked his daughters,

“Many of us seem to have lost the concept of what life is like beyond the world of technology, you know, girls. Do you remember playing outside until dusk and coming home with grass-stains on your pants?”

“Sure, Dad, they said in unison.”

“Unimaginable nowadays. Too many children grow up inside, sheltered, and can’t imagine life without technology.”

“What’s wrong that the kids do not value time away from the screen?” asked Nooria, her face becoming red under her strong emotions.

“Technology is sure a friend or a foe,” replied their dad.

“It’s a rift through our society, Dad, and I mean it literally,” said Nooria.

“Okay, girls, are you ready?” pressed their dad. “Let’s change the world of technology.” He turned around towards the assistant, “Hey, Clark, let’s introduce the new lifeware.”

Clark replied from behind the huge machines, “Isn’t Brother Waqar coming today to try it with us? Do we need to wait for him?”

Zia’s heart rate galloped. Did her dad change his mind?

“No,” replied their dad, “we are not at the tryout stage. I’ll invite him next time.” He turned towards Zia who gulped every bit of the exchange with expectation and declared knowingly, “for a private viewing.”

Zia pouted, but her dad did not pay attention. He continued in Clark’s direction, “Today, I just want to explain the concept to my daughters, so that they will be prepared the next time they show up. Okay, girls, Clark and I will show you how it looks once you are inside. Look at the monitor screen now.”

Zia turned towards the screen and gasped. What was this place? She had never seen anything like this.

“Is this heaven, Dad?” she asked. “All this white sand, so pure, flowing around like water.”

“No,” he said, laughing. “Actually quite the contrary. It’s the desert.”

“The desert?” exclaimed both girls together.

“Waqar’s idea,” admitted their dad humbly. “He picked the place and time. I think it’s ingenious.”

Zia gathered Clark’s expression in a rapid glance. He was still glancing towards the entrance where Elham had now completely disappeared. Then he looked at her and shrugged.

The Fertility Clinic

It was in the little hours in the morning and Nooria had just returned from the clinic. She wanted to announce to Phil that she had delivered Maymoona's baby. She was so excited about it. Her feet danced on the floor and her heart leaped inside her chest like on a trampoline.

She passed her hand on the door and it unzipped after it recognized her fingerprints. There was no light inside. The darkened coatroom seemed strangely empty. Nooria inhaled deeply to find the comforting evasive smell of Phil lingering about. Nothing. She groped around for her hubby's coat and shoes, but found only a cold empty wall and floor. She clapped for the light fixture to turn on. Nothing. Maybe he had gone out because he could not sleep. It was tough on Phil to wait for her when she was on duty. He worked from home and often felt lonely without her. Sometimes she found little poems decorated on the coatroom for her to find when she came back. He would also stick snaps of her getting dressed or waking up in the morning on the wall. It was upsetting and cute. She scratched the wall to uncover a poem he had tried to erase in one of their arguments. The poem said, "Love me. Love only me." Suddenly the poem did not make sense anymore to him. It hurt his feelings so raw. Phil had said, "I will cover it until you understand what it means."

Now, in the middle of the night, alone and excited to share her secret, Nooria discovered a new meaning to the poem. If he had found someone else to love? Polygyny was the norm. Why not? Nooria stooped a moment under the hurt of her thoughts. She dawdled towards the bedroom and saw the missing clothes by transparency through the fading closets even before she tried to open them. She threw herself on the bed, clasping a body shaped pillow and felt asleep right there, her mind numbed by her disappointment.

It is only in the afternoon that she found his message. She enabled it. She heard Phil's

tired voice. It said, "I'm gone on vacation. I wanted to tell you, but... Never mind. See you in a week, or maybe two."

A few days later, Nooria went to her weekly appointment at the fertility clinic. She still had not activated the test results for Phil and tried to delay it as much as possible. "Do I, do I not," she thought throughout the day without being able to find an answer. "Do you, or do you not activate the slimpad?" she wondered while going around her routine. She felt a little silly carrying the slimpad everywhere she went, but it forced her to remember that it was her future with Phil. She contemplated the idea of throwing the tests in the trash several times, but still feared Phil's reaction if he heard of it, and he would certainly hear of it, ask about it. Maybe she would just send it to his place of vacation. Now, that was an idea! She shook her head, disgusted by herself. No, that would be bitchy or cowardly, whichever comes first. She also had to find a way to tell him she was now in charge of a teenager, Elham, Maymoona's niece. It was only temporary, but she had not sought his approval. In a way, she was happy he had gone for the week because it allowed her some respite and time to think it through. At the same time, she felt abandoned. And his little trip did not reassure her in the least; it was suspicious and somewhere inside her she was scared of his return and what he had decided away from her. She prepared her mind for anything.

This was her last time to see this doctor. She had decided to go back to natural remedies; they were the best. All the high tech treatment had only given her the drugs' side effects and no result whatsoever. And there was the possibility that Phil would start seeing a man's fertility specialist. She squeezed the pad in her hands. In there was their future.

Nooria looked around the office. Coming here was like a second home. Here she met other women who shared her concerns. She enjoyed these casual, quick meetings where people did not know her personally but still felt the need to confide in her as she felt inclined to do so herself. It helped her keep focused and, even though briefly, gave her a sense of a close tight community, a comforting cocoon right at the footsteps of the doctor's office. And she did not have to go far either since it was located in the same building where she worked. That was convenient. She actually met Claire quite often. She liked sister Claire.

Today, Claire was here again, and at the ready for comical remarks and long debates as they were waiting for their turn to be seen by the fertility specialists. Claire was the only person who really helped her relax although sometimes in a very silly way. Claire was busy on the phone, so Nooria just waved at her and sat down. She pulled the hanging parts of her *hijab*, and made knots with them. She was nervous; she wondered if she really had to quit seeing all these specialists just for sanity sake. Was it okay to decide without Phil? He might resent it, and again he might not. He might feel hurt or relieved. She wasn't sure at this point. He never talked to her anymore about his deeper feelings, and she was left hanging in there most of the time. A deep hollow pain carved holes in her stomach. She wished Claire was done talking so that she could focus on something else. Claire was usually a great distraction.

She shook her head again to get rid of her thoughts and soon she peeled out a magazine from the stacks of magazine lying in the waiting room. She listened to the headlines for some time, and then put them back. She could not concentrate enough to "read." Besides, she felt very skeptical as she regarded all mass literature on fertility issues.

Claire suddenly said aloud, "Honey, I'm pregnant," and laughed.

Nooria was startled, "What is it, Claire?"

Claire lifted her chin up as if to see her friend better, and declared, “Oh... they say it here, on the magazine you are putting away. I thought that was funny.”

“Why?” asked Nooria, curious.

“Well, do you know where the expression ‘honeymoon’ comes from?”

Nooria shrugged and said bitterly, “Honey! Another moon goes us by.”

Claire smiled, looked vaguely at the paper, and then explained, “I learned that some time ago. Apparently it stems from Anglo-Saxon times when newlyweds would take honey every day for a month to increase fertility!”

“How funny,” burst Nooria half heartedly.

Claire picked up another magazine and sighed, “Really funny. Hey! Isn’t honey in the Muslim medicinal cupboard? A honey a day pushes the doctor away or something like that?”

“Exactly.” Nooria could not help being a professional again. “Honey is full of hormones and vitamins. You know that there is a hospital in China that used bee-propolis to treat its hundreds of patients with dramatic results!?”

“No kidding.”

“Yeah. Royal jelly is modified pollen fed only to the reproducing queen bee, you know. And what’s her job?”

“Er... I don’t know. To rule?”

Nooria cackled and crossed one leg on top of the other, trying to find a more comfortable position.

She said triumphantly, “To reproduce, of course!”

“Oh my!”

“Yep, dear Claire, that’s her fertility drug. It can even stop miscarriage.”

“This stuff really works? No way!” exclaimed Claire in surprise.

“It is a bit pricey though. You know, this stuff is so strong you can only take 1/4 teaspoon every day.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Nooria sighed unhappily. “Every day someone comes up with a new formula. Didn’t you notice, Claire? After all, infertility can be caused by all sorts of things, a slight deficit in vitamins, excess exercise, being overweight, eating beans, or acidic foods, and so on and so forth. I am at a loss. If you try what everybody is talking about, you’d be there trying for hundreds of years.”

“There’s a cure for every illness, dear.”

“Sure, the only problem is to find what is working for you.”

“Are you having PMS problems, Nooria?”

“A bit right now.”

“It shows!!” said Claire with a big grin.

They laughed.

“Seriously,” said Claire balancing a leg on the couch, and trying to regain her balance. “Have you tried an herb called "vitex"? They also call it "Chaste berry" as if reproduction was about chastity or something.” She giggled. “It really helps to make regular periods. I told my nurse midwife about it, and she says that it is what she recommends.”

“Oh? I’m also a midwife, you know, but I have never heard of it. You should give me your midwife’s phone number.”

“Sure,” said Claire giggling. “Give me your recorder and I’ll imprint her phone.”

Nooria gave it to her and waited patiently. It took only a few minutes. While Claire was

doing this, Nooria could not help wondering if Phil would like that better.

“Oh, yes,” added Claire. Nooria was startled. Did she say that aloud or something? Her mouth gaped open. Claire continued, “And you know what? Now the herb is also known as chaste tree because it was used by nuns and monks into the Middle Ages to lower sex drive!”

Nooria relaxed. She looked around, ducked, paused, and then said teasingly, “Maybe not good for you...”

Claire whispered merrily, “Score!” On a more serious side, Claire explained, “You know, what’s important for me now is that vitex also inhibits the secretion of prolactin.”

“Big words now, Claire? You’ve been educating yourself? So... really?”

“Yeah, sure. Prolactin increases milk production, every mommy’s dream, you know. And in excessive amounts may contribute to infertility. That might be my case you know. Hope it is just that...”

Nooria opened another part of the magazine.

She confided, “Progesterone? Interesting, but really old stuff.”

“At least it works faster than herbs...” assured Claire.

“Congrats,” said Nooria very warmly. She threw her magazine on the pile and tugged at her skirt that stuck under her thighs. “Do your homework. It is always what I tell my clients. They are the ones who know their body the best. Then bring out your questions.”

“I assure you,” said Claire very convincingly and looking at her fingernails. “Many doctors will not conduct tests until it’s too late, but you can request them. You never know, it may be a very simple thing that can help you with your pregnancy. It’s your body, and your baby. Well, at least, your future baby.”

“I may, actually, I may,” confessed Nooria. “To be honest with you, I’d prefer that much

better. The thought of chemicals, and more chemicals being forced into my body is not something I relish. What kind of baby do they think I want? A chemical baby?!!”

“You’re right,” reinforced Claire, “even the weakest drugs can cause serious side effects. Besides, did you know this? Thousands of people in this country die every year from over the counter drugs! Doctors are pushed to medicate their clients with products that make money. Business, business... The result? A few other hundreds of deaths every year from diagnosed medications.”

“Gee!” said Nooria, outraged.

Claire nodded. She winked at Nooria.

“One more reason to go natural.” Nooria took this as a confirmation that this was the path. Maybe that was the solution. It was worth a try.

Out of the blue, Claire asked, “I see that you are not feeling so good, gal. Are you going through the bottom?”

“I’m not doing so good, that’s true,” said Nooria with a shy inward movement of the shoulders.

“Well... I wonder... er... if you would not like to join our Muslim fertility group?”

“A Muslim fertility group?” repeated Nooria surprised, “Huh! I don’t know, maybe...”

“I could introduce you if you wish. These sisters are a great help and, I must confess, I did not come with all these ideas out of my own frazzled head; the sisters helped me make the connections.”

“Really?”

“We meet a little bit after we have done our visits; stay around and I’ll walk you there.”

Nooria smiled happily, “Okay, we’ll do that... A Muslim Fertility group, huh? Interesting.

Sure, I'll go. No strings attached, right?"

"No strings attached," smiled Claire.

The nurse suddenly called Claire's name.

"Oops, time's up, sis. Stick around..."

"Sure," she smiled very excited, saying to herself; *I'll be! A Muslim Fertility group...*

Once Claire was in the doctor's office, she let the slimpad slip from her hands onto the pile of magazines, then she stood up to leave.

"Ma'am," she heard the secretary holler behind her. She came running after her, the slimpad in her hand. "Ma'am," she said again. "Is this yours?"

Nooria looked at the tests indifferently, paused and then declared with confidence, "There must be a mistake. These are not mine. Thanks though."

"But Ma'am? Aren't you waiting for the doctor?"

Nooria looked at the woman with pride. After a moment of reflection, she declared, "You can cancel my appointment. Thank you."

Happy Future Moms' group

Nooria stopped to decipher the panel on the top of the door. It had the picture of a happy face with a *hijab*, and when she stopped in front of it, it said boldly: "Happy Future Moms' group welcomes you!"

She held Zia's arm for reassurance. Nooria had called her sister Zia so that she could accompany her. Claire had an errand to make; she had called Nooria to give her the directions to the meeting room.

The sisters entered the room together. It had a very high ceiling for levitation therapy, and floating hammocks. In the center of the room, a cavitation pump had been placed to create an eye-catching effect. The implosion of bubbles within the liquid was fascinating and very relaxing, and it had the advantage of warming up the room.

A lady was talking and all women were riveted to her speech. Nooria counted them. There were six women attending the meeting.

The lady was saying, "Why I want a child? My husband is the only son in the family, and I am the first married child in my family, so I would be so happy to have the first grandson for my parents and his. I am on a special diet therapy that is supposed to help having boys. I love them very much and they love me too. They have not been pushy or anything like that, they'd better not, but I know they are anxious for us to be happy, and our happiness is not and will never be complete without at least a child. At least, that's how I feel. I know that few people think that way, but that's how I feel anyway. So, you can imagine how much I would really like to please them because of all the happiness they have brought me, as well as accepting me in their family."

The ladies clapped. It was another sister's turn. She was a brunette with a translucent

yellow tunic. Her words were so much in contrast with the way she dressed, it made Nooria wonder if she was in the right place, “I want a child because I think it’s what God wants. When my husband came to meet me the first time - before we married, he talked with me about many things in Islam to make sure that we agreed on everything. One of the topics was the fact that God said He created some women to be fertile and some not, and since there is no sex before marriage, there is no way to find out until after we are married. So for both of us, to be happy, we have to accept whatever Allah has for us, including the fact that we may not have children in this life. We do say thanks for everything, because everything is from Allah. I am still working on this part. He is better at accepting things.” She looked down at her hands and blushed lightly. Some ladies nodded their heads in approval. That was a good reflection.

Then it was the turn of another lady, a sister from Pakistan maybe. She had beautiful milk skin and her eyes were shaped like almonds.

She said, “We were happy though, for some years, incredibly happy. We pushed away the moment we had to face reality; we did not want to face it. It was enough to try to know each other well. Then people started to make remarks about my husband and every time I met sisters they asked, ‘If you’re not happy without a child, why do you not look for another man and maybe he would do his job better? That made me feel raped, emotionally raped, I mean. So, someone I know told me about this group and I really wanted to find women who share the same feelings.”

“So you want a child because you care about what people think?” whispered Zia in her sister’s ears.

Zia looked at her sister intently. Nooria fitted just right in. She also had a great husband who offered great support, but she wasn’t happy with that. Nooria looked back at her and

suddenly started to speak aloud, interested and eager to let it all out, “I know exactly how you feel. This is a big issue for me also. I tell them to pray for me and they answer like this, ‘Who is going to take care of the baby when it is born? You will? No. Your husband will because most men prefer staying at home. What’s the point? When will you see this baby? The feminist movement exists because of your kind of gals.’ And then they look me up and down, meaning ‘I am not going to deal with that girl!’”

The Asian woman crossed her fingers over her lap and answered, “Yes, people can be really hurtful. Most people look at me and say, ‘You’ve been to college. Why throwing away all these years of studies to be dependent on a little brat?’ as if I was out of my mind.”

Nooria added in the same direction, “And then, when someone work, they say, ‘Are you waiting to get laid off? Kids are not going to let you have your career, you know?’ Sometimes this is the only thing that concerns them. Sometimes I feel like stepping up, saying, ‘Are you a human race killer? Because I’m not.’”

“Surely not!” commented the Pakistani. She gave high fives to Nooria. Nooria smiled between her tears. Zia pulled out a disposable handkerchief from her belt and gave it to her sister.

Another lady added, “If we remember that our spouses and children are trials for us, then we can start to understand that what we are is not defined by them.”

The first one acquiesced, “We are not, but the problem is we fit in one group or another depending on our situation. If we have kids, we can belong to a moms’ group, the bad guys. If not, we belong in the singles’ group, the good guys. It’s not healthy. We want kids, yes, but we also want to be normal adults!”

A mulatto sister joined in, “Why would you care being defined by the eyes of others, sisters,

by the eyes of people who have already a lot of issues? Are we not defined by Allah?”

The beautiful Asian woman nodded assent and raised a fist in the air. She said passionately, “You bet! But that’s ideal. Wouldn’t that be something?! I’d like to meet the sister who says, ‘What do you have in store for the next life? Piety goes first. Work on being strong from within, sister.’”

An African American sister tapped on the Asian’s sister lap and declared, “Yeah! People have to understand you are not just a womb, you are not just a black person, and you are not just this or that. The wives of the Prophet did not conceive, except for two of them! People nowadays take that as a blessing from God. They say those who do not have children follow the tradition of Islam and the ones who want children go against the sacred principles of our religion.”

“Er... I don’t think that’s right,” whispered Zia stunned.

The Pakistani lady started to sob, heaved and finally declared, “I wish they wouldn’t say all those things, sister. It hurts my feelings. All the talk about not knowing what you are talking about concerning children, being better off or lucky without them, wears me out so much...”

The black lady said, “This is very demeaning, but at least we have great husbands who feel the same way we do, don’t we?”

The lady in yellow admitted, “I spend my time wishing I could at least feel bored or worn out by the children. That would feel so good! The rest of the time is consumed with doctors’ appointments, charting my temperature, cervical mucus, and cervical changes, taking drugs for which I obtain only the side effects, and dealing with family pressures to not have children. This is not a fun free time!”

“Not a fun free time, ladies! Did you hear that?” shouted the black woman with the definite accent. Zia opened her eyes wide. The sister was pinching her lips so tight they changed color.

She continued, “Who thinks the same way, raise your hand?”

All the women raised their hand.

She finished, “That’s what I thought! The worst response I have ever had from sisters is this, ‘It’s easy you know to have kids. Not having one takes more guts’. Go figure. I say, ‘Do not worry, you will get there someday’ just to scare them and who knows, they might. What goes around, comes around. And they wave their hands into the air as if they were discarding all your efforts. I am not sure what will happen tomorrow. How can they be so sure?”

Zia recognized Nooria’s voice and turned towards her. It was Nooria’s turn to talk. She confessed, “Going through fertility treatments is such a pain! That task, many couples are not emotionally or spiritually able to go through it, I believe. We should be given badges. Honest! Many couples are destroyed attempting this.”

“Yeah... right. A so-called friend told me one day, ‘You know, you shouldn’t try so hard to have kids, your husband will look for another sister.’”

The black lady stood up suddenly and exploded, “The nerve! It is as if men did not want children. Mine do, even more than I do! Praise God.”

Nooria nodded her head up and down. A deep frown was now creasing her forehead. Nooria flipped the brim of her scarf a few times before saying, “They meet so many women who complain they have too many children and get pregnant as soon as their husband lays eyes on them, that they cannot admit other sisters would love that for themselves. They cannot admit that men would like that for themselves too!”

Suddenly, the first lady who had talked when they entered the room, a small blond with a colorful scarf that started at the bun said, “What we do not get to enjoy here, we will, *God willing*, get to enjoy in heaven. So sisters, don’t give up. We will all get our chance, either in this

life, or in the next, and all according to the will of Allah.”

“That’s surely a good reminder...” whispered Zia to her sister. “They got me worried for a spin.”

Nooria pushed a few tears back in her eyes with her handkerchief before the material absorbed all of them, one by one. She pulled out the faceless baby bear whose arm she had broken a few weeks earlier. Zia looked at her as if she was crazy. Nooria hesitated a moment, but finally decided, since she was at it, she’d better let it all out.

She started slowly, weighing every single word, “I carry this teddy bear with me to remind me there will be another baby shower tomorrow. I just wish there were only a few pregnancies, but there are way too many people around.” She snorted. “I’ve dealt with five baby showers already this year. This weekend I am again invited. Gosh! It’s tough! I know, I should not complain; babies are my profession... But I’d rather deliver babies than listen to all their chit chat about how it feels to be pregnant. But the worse is that my husband has to be there and listen to me complaining about it. It’s tough on him too.”

Zia held her sister’s hand, and then felt taken into the flow of emotions. She declared wholeheartedly, “Frankly, sisters, there should be a book called *How to Suffer Through a Baby Shower* that you could offer other sisters and brothers. That would be an eye opener.”

The black lady humored, making a face, “If I were one of the sisters for whom they do the baby shower, I would end up being so scared, I would think twice about keeping this baby! Serious! It’s all talk of pregnancy, pregnant women, discussions of the horrors of pregnancy, labor, birth and the traps of parenting. Sometimes it is a lot to take on, even when you are barren, and even when you are not feeling bad being invited! And yes, you’re right, my husband has to be there listening to me complain for hours. I hardly think about it, but that must be hard on him

too.”

The brunette kicked her flying chair around to get closer to each sister and put her hands on Nooria’s shoulders from behind before flying around again.

Nooria reflected for a moment, and then leaned over, one leg crossing on top of the other. She grabbed one knee and circled it with her arms.

She said, “I know that it is bad to relish on other people’s miseries, but I think what helps me the most is that I see around me all kinds of horror stories like girls getting a divorce because they got pregnant, and the baby's father ran off on them, or couples getting pregnant so young they feel the need to abort, I would've been freaking out! So, I am grateful that Allah saved me from that. I am grateful that God gave me a companion who is willing to back me up, whatever happens.”

The lady with the white scarf slid towards Nooria and Zia and grabbed Nooria’s chair with both her hands.

She said, “Here is a good tip. Avoid conversations about pregnancies or babies if you want to save your marriage. Good idea, isn’t it?”

The mulatto intervened, “Wear tighter clothes. Certain tunics and bulky clothes make me look a few months pregnant, so people grab my stomach and start asking if I have any ‘neews’?... That freaks out hubby. And exercise! Another lady screamed at the top of her lungs ‘You're pregnant!!!’ in public just because I had just climbed a few flights of steps in the summer heat and had my hands on my hips, puffing. Then I had to tell her ‘um, no...’”

The lady with the yellow scarf smiled, looking in the back of the room with dreamy eyes. She said, “Try to remember, sisters, that each day that passes is one day closer to holding your baby in your arms.”

Nooria was immediately reminded of Elham waiting for her in the clinic and felt happy. She did not need a baby anymore; she had a grown baby to take care of. The pain these ladies were feeling did not seem worth it anymore. Breaking up her marriage did not feel worth anymore either. These ladies seemed to try to find all kinds of reasons to get through the day, alone, not as a couple, but no amount of talk could change the situation that they were barren and seriously damaging their marriage. Nooria had felt too secure in her marriage she had forgotten that Phil too had feelings. Maybe this time she needed to be his back up. Wasn't the sudden lonely vacation he had taken a sign? Nooria thanked Claire inwardly to mention this group. No way this was the Happy Future Moms' group. It was rather the Happy Future Single Mother group or the Happy Future Divorced Mother group. It was staring them in the face. What would be a future without Phil? No baby could replace him!

Suddenly, Nooria felt nauseated. All this talk was overwhelming in a bad way; it made her feel worse and did not console her. What was she doing here? Zia looked at her like an alien. She opened her eyes wide as if to ask a silent question. Her mouth opened up but nothing came out of it.

All of a sudden, Nooria darted off the room with Zia at her heels. When Nooria stopped in the middle of the corridor, she said, "Zia, I'm through. I do not want to be associated with these sisters, these women. I am better than that. I have been proactive since the beginning and now that there may be no hope, I just want to live a normal life. I do not want to be a case. I want to be normal. Do you understand this?"

Zia nodded and grabbed her sister's shoulders.

“I thought this was not a good idea, Nooria. You have never been comfortable with anonymous groups.”

Nooria trembled and panted and then, in a matter of seconds, she started to calm down and a resolve was clearly visible on her face.

“I do not care what will happen from now on, Zia, I am just going to live normally with what I have and now it is my husband. My happiness is mine to keep. Do you understand?”

“Good for you, Nooria. That’s wise. I couldn’t agree more.”

“Isn’t it?” said Nooria with a smile.

Zia smiled and admired her sister’s resolve.

“Oh, remember you promised to come to the TIMnasium with me tomorrow?”

“Okay, fine, I’ll come.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah cool” said Nooria beaming, staring somewhere in the distance.

Zia waved goodbye, but her sister could not see her anymore.

“Salam Nooria,” she whispered as she looked at a strange lady walking on clouds in her way to the clinic. It felt good to see Nooria smile again.

Nooria Comes To Class

Zia stood in position after the model of her other classmates. She liked the way her teacher now inserted Islamic values in her instruction; that reconciled the girl with the whole practice. Nooria would certainly like it. By the way, she was late. Zia wondered if she would make it on time.

The teacher started by standing tall, opening her feet wider and stretching her arms up, and then said, “The Islamic *Salât* awakens some of the body natural ways of healing as I explained the other day. However, Yoga awakens some areas more deeply and is able to heal by acupressure.”

Someone asked, “What is acupressure, sister?”

She answered, pushing her fingers in one arm to demonstrate, “It is a pressure point therapy. By pressing points on the body, acupressure has the ability to rebalance the body’s energies.”

She put her hands over her sacrum followed by her students. She inhaled deeply and looked around before adding, “Standing tall and hands on chest together as we do when we pray is a pose very similar to the Mountain Pose in Yoga. It has been found to improve posture, balance, and self-awareness. This position also normalizes blood pressure and breathing, thus providing many benefits to asthma and heart patients, two major complaints of the century.” She looked at Zia before adding, “The Mountain Pose is acquired by the Muslim especially during the long standing prayers.”

Zia nodded her head and closed her eyes to feel the pose.

Suddenly, the voice of her sister echoed in her headphone. Nooria had arrived and was waiting in the parking lot.

“Meet me at the TIM tree base,” she said in the telepathyphone.

Zia excused herself, gesturing, and went downstairs to meet her.

A few minutes later, Nooria hugged her sister warmly.

“*Salam alaikum*, Zia. How are you today?”

Zia jumped up and down and looked her sister over with approval.

“How are YOU feeling, Nooria. You positively beam.”

“O, I just had a long discussion with Phil. I’ll go join him at his vacation place right after the class.”

“Great, Nooria. Good for you! Thanks to God, you’re here! Yeeha! She took her sister’s arm, very excited. I am so glad you came. You are going to like this class. Miss Munira is so impressive...”

“We’ll see. Magnificent building!” She said, gazing at the huge main column. She looked at the signs around the building and exclaimed, in surprise, “Look! They have spas, barbers, the state of the art gym with mountain climbing treadmills and computerized squash games as well as the traditional non gravity room! She looked at the panels that showed images of the building. They did not need to read anymore; modern life had made it obsolete. Hmm.... Look here, she said amused. They even have a preschool totally computerized and gym based for gross motor and fine motor development, and a digital library for instant knowledge assimilation with 3-D slide shows!”

Zia gestured, excited, towards a series of panels that flipped pictures of happy families and described the services of the TIMnasium.

“And you know what? Moms get to spend the day in the TIM building without having to worry about their kids. I wonder if Mia would like it here...”

“So much for family life,” smiled Zia.

“But very practical indeed. I almost envy all those moms,” she half-humored before her face crumpled up to make a funny face.

Zia laughed. Her sister looked funny today. She did not recognize her anymore. She tried to change the subject to free her mind from her thoughts, “There are very cool stuffs in here. One can feel much protected within these walls without worrying about the violence outside.”

“Yeah,” said Nooria evasively, playing with the brim of her headscarf.

Zia insisted, her eyes riveted into Nooria’s eyes as if expecting something to happen. She added, “Maybe it is a great alternative to what we have outside.”

“Sure, if you do not care to live in the real world anymore,” said Nooria with a sigh. “I think the TIM project really answers a lot of people’s wishes. Here is a fantastic place where all you have to do is think about yourself; the rest is taken care of. And they offer religious classes to top it all.”

“Sure, if you’ve got moolah,” answered Zia. “Yea know? That’ll work for those who work here. Eh! They might take me as a spiritual leader one day or even an apprentice!”

“You never know, Zia. God willing,” said Nooria thoughtfully. “When you are done with your studies. First comes first.”

Zia froze. Gee! She did not want to enter into this conversation again. She had so many dreams, so much hope. She did not understand why her sister’s dreams had shrunk so much lately, maybe these last years, actually since she got married. Argh! She did not have friends anymore; she went outside only when invited and was very selective about her outings. Her sister had become a mystery. She used to encourage Zia to follow her instincts and desires. Now, she was all caution and drawbacks. What was going on? Zia was shocked. She promised herself she

would never marry if it meant leaving behind dreams or try to be happy underneath it all. So, she changed subject.

“I thought the building was a little bit primitive at first, but that’s because I did not see the individual coaches that bring you right where you want to go. First time I arrived, I took the rolling carpets instead and lost some time trying to find the class. Someone mentioned them to me last time.”

She showed Nooria the coaches parked under the escalators. They climbed in, and Zia punched her credit card into the slot. She chose Yoga class in the menu, then the teacher. Nooria looked at her sister inquisitively, opened her eyes wide, and then asked, with incredulity, “Did you just paid this class on credit, or did I saw you punch the wrong button?”

Zia cast down her head slightly, feeling ashamed. She hesitated between lying and telling the truth.

“Er... Wrong button. I’ll straighten up with the teacher at the end of the session,” she said to avoid any conflict.

Nooria was now looking at her from under with one eye half closed.

She is going to reprimand me, she thought, panicking. I know this look, and I would not mistake it for anything in the world. Oh, no! Her excitement over her sister coming to the TIMnasium started to dull. *Please, sis, she thought inwardly, I beg you, do not make me regret inviting you here.*

“Great,” said Nooria to Zia’s relief. “It’s all between you and God anyway.”

Zia zoomed back far away, her soul aching. She retrieved to a Zen state where she was dumb to her conscience. A nice music vibrated from the coach. Most music nowadays was subliminal in order to bring benefits to the inner parts of the brain.

Both women were delivered almost instantaneously inside the classroom that connected through an unbreakable glass tube. After that, the sisters went to a different part of the classroom together.

Because Zia had asked for it, sister Munira explained the similarities between the Muslim prayer postures and the Yoga *âsanas*. She made her students gather near a series of posters that showed each posture in details, and explained, “You know, Yoga is originally not a religious thing. Sages from India found that sitting in meditation for hours was difficult; therefore they had to find a way to prepare their body for it. They began to look around them, how the cat stretched after a nap, what the bird did with its legs after sitting in its nest, the way the mountain stood, etc. They had plenty of time before them and tried to learn from their environment. So they tried to move in the manner of the animals or stand in a way of inanimate things, which they found strengthening and revitalizing. This is how Yoga, or *hatha*, was born.”

“You’d say...,” sighed Nooria amazed. Zia nodded knowingly towards her sister.

Zia pictured nostalgically how it could have been, these men so close to nature, they could actually touch trees, look inside nests, see a flower unfurl. They had so much time on their hands! There was no acid rain! Times had definitely changed for the worse. She was glad though this was passed on, but could she really feel what these men felt, the peace they felt, without experiencing the real thing? She tried to breathe slowly, but a weight pressed on her chest, making it impossible to use her belly to inhale. She remembered another class she attended before. Sis Munira had explained, “The breath stimulates the blood circulation. The circulation stimulates the nerves of the body. This energy flows along the spine and opens the heart, the mind. We relax and invite beautiful images inside ourselves: mountain tops, sea landscapes, etc.

Our body is the place we take as a safe harbor. We feel safe inside ourselves; we feel happy. When we learn to tune out the past and the future, we quiet our mind. That's the spirit of Yoga." That was so beautiful. How come life had become so complicated? How come every effort had become so painful? She felt her chest contract even more.

A few people scratched their heads.

Sister Munira paused, and then added, "Of course, people of the year 3000 feel very disconnected from Yoga, although it is still used as therapy because we do not really have occasions to contemplate a forest, or a mountain, or to look at a cat, or a dog because most wild areas are closed now, and people do not have pets anymore. Time is passing so fast, we barely have time for ourselves, certainly not to care for other creatures."

Nooria nodded assent. She was standing her legs straight and crossed, her arms also crossed, fully focused on the conversation.

Miss Munira kept a smile on her face, twirled her orange dress forward in a quick and gracious step, and showed the next posters.

She explained, "The root meaning of the word *salât* is "to bend", "to bow", as in Hatha Yoga; the Persians translated this concept with the word *namâz*, meaning "to bow", a word related to the Sanskrit word *namaste*."

"Namaste!" Exclaimed Nooria, intrigued. "Isn't that the Indi salutation?"

"Precisely!"

She winced.

Sister Munira did not pay attention to Nooria and continued, looking very confident, "The Mountain Pose, *TâDâsana*, is the foundation for all standing *âsanas* in Yoga. It is the first pose we begin with, and it is the one we finish with. It is similar to the standing posture named

qiyâm in the Muslim prayer, and the standing pose called "Return to Mountain" of T'ai Chi Chuan. The placement of the hands on the chest during the Libya position is said to activate the solar plexus or "chakra," or nerve pathway, which directs our awareness of self in the world and controls the health of the muscular system, skin, intestines, liver, pancreas, gallbladder and eyes. When the hands are held open for the Muslim supplication, they activate the heart "chakra," said to be the center of the feelings and emotions. It governs the health of the heart, the lungs, the thymus, the immune system, and the circulatory system."

Nooria frowned deeply. Zia watched her intently.

Sister Munira continued, "The Muslim's bending position is very similar to the Forward Bend Position in Yoga. *Ruku* or bowing stretches the muscles of the lower back, thighs, legs and calves, and allows blood to be pumped down into the upper torso. It tones the muscles of the stomach, abdomen, and kidneys.

The Islamic prayer includes a pose, called *sujûd*, where the head is placed below the heart, helping the blood to go to the brain and to oxygenate the brain. Since 20% of the oxygen absorbed by the body is used by the brain, it is not surprising that this pose has been discovered to enhance brain's capacities.

The Yoga's *âsanas* called the Shoulderstand or *sarvangâsana*, the 'whole body pose' and the Headstand or *sirSâsana* play the same role in pumping the blood into the brain and upper half of the body, including eyes, ears, nose and lungs."

By now, Nooria had a grin about her face.

Finally, sister Munira said as a way of conclusion, "The word *âsana* means "to seat." It is a basic posture of meditation. It is an essential posture in *Salât* too. The Diamond Pose or

vajrâsana is practically identical with the seated position of *salât* called *jalsah*. As for meditation, *trâTaka* is a yogic technique to focus the attention on a single point. While standing in Islamic prayer, we practice *traTaka* by fixing the gaze on a spot on the ground where we put our forehead. It helps keeping the balance, concentrating in *Salât*, and forgetting about the world around us by focusing inside oneself.”

A profound silence settled in the classroom as everyone was absorbing the incredible amount of information.

The next half hour was passed practicing these poses.

When they were done, Zia eyed Nooria until her gaze hooked her sister’s own gaze. They smiled back to each other.

“So?” whispered Zia after the class, sitting close to Nooria. “What do you think?”

“You want the truth?”

“Sure... don’t tell me the truth is not going to please me?” she pleaded.

“It’s not. You see, I do not buy this want to be mystic half Islamic thing, but it’s just me.”

“I’m giving up on you, sis!”

“Really?” laughed Nooria. “What!? Because she did not convince me that Yoga is like praying the Islamic way?”

“Because you’re so down to earth.”

“Eh, kiddo! She has just described the salutation to the sun as bowing to God. Isn’t the tree hiding the forest here, sis?”

Zia teased, “Funny right-brainer!”

“Funny left brainer!” replied Nooria amused.

“I guess you’re right. I did not see it that way. This stuff was so amazing.”

“You’d better pay attention if you really want to become an *imam*, sis, honestly.”

Nooria closed her lips tight, and then she finally cooed, “Zia? Have you ever heard of “the divine in me honors the divine in you”?”

“Nope! What are you talking about?” She shrugged, not seeing where her sister was leading to, not wanting to, really.

“That’s what the Sun Salutation mean - *Surya Namaskar!*”

“No kidding, in a nut shell? How do you know that?”

“I’ve been young too. I’ve been through this too, this all spiritual phase that has nothing to do with real faith. *Surya Namaskar*, or Sun Salutation, indeed! This ritual is included in the regular morning prayer and worship of the Hindu! It is the prayer of Lord Surya, the god of health. It is a ritual prostration, sis! Sister Munira sounds like a highly educated woman, but she seems out of line to me.”

Zia was stunned. She shivered out of fear of Allah. *Man!* Her mind raced and she made a note to never do this stance again. *Salutation to the sun?! Gross!*

Nooria stood up before adding, “I recommend you stay away from this class, at least if you are serious about becoming an *imam*.”

Zia looked up and opened the palm of her hands wide before asking painfully, “Why could not Yoga be a way to master concentration in a relaxed, free atmosphere? The energy of the working group is in itself so self-motivating! I do feel more inclined to pray since I began practicing Yoga.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but sis, honest... you still have a lot to learn about Islam.”

Nooria stretched her hand to help her stand up, and added as a way of conclusion, “Many Muslims nowadays have forgotten about the inspired sayings of our Prophet that reminds us that

any innovation is in the fire. This sounds like an innovation to me.” She smiled tenderly, waved her hands on the air, and added to break the tension, “See the flames?”

Sister Munira overheard the last part and walked closer, confident as if she had tackled those questions before. She put her hands on the shoulder of each girl and looked at both in turn.

She explained, “There is in Islam what is *haram* and what is *Halal*, sisters, what is good and what is bad, and there are many fine lines we are unsure about. There are things that are invented matters, but among these there is the reprehensible invention that is not acceptable, and the good invention that is praiseworthy, and things that are neither good neither bad but tolerated. There are things that were not practiced at the time of our Prophet, but if they are useful and beneficial, they are considered good. Just to give you something to think about, sisters.”

“Oh, we will,” assured Nooria. “We will.”

She thanked the teacher, and then turned around to leave. She was outraged. *Wow! That was rude!*

Zia followed closely behind after putting her hand over her heart in a sign of warm salute towards the other ladies. She almost ran to take Nooria over.

“What’s wrong, Nooria?” she said out of breath.

Nooria was still walking furiously towards the stairs. She exploded, “I just cannot stand people who are trying to become scholars. She clearly does not know what she is talking about. I advise you to avoid this place unless you are talking to a real scholar.”

“Oh! I can’t stand it, Nooria,” exclaimed Zia holding on to her sister’s shoulder and turning her around to look at her. “You become more and more like Dad. You impose yourself

on others; you think you know more than anybody else, but really, you are just... just... O, I don't know."

"So right?" hinted Nooria.

Zia wandered in the city for hours before she was ready to go home. She had a lot of mixed feelings about what had happened at the gymnasium. She was angry at herself for not seeing right through Miss Munira. She was disappointed in the new TIMnasium. She felt very lonely now. She was also angry at Nooria for treating her like a teenager. After all, she could not know everything about everything. She was also angry at her dad for not letting her meet with the only scholar she knew. How was she supposed to learn all that stuff? She was still infuriated or even more when she parked her Subair on ground. Once she arrived home, she found her roommate busy putting away baby's diapers in the living room to give them to Nooria. She let it out like a steam, "Humph! Can't you do that in your room?" she blurted out, angry.

Her roommate looked at her puzzled.

"What is going on now?!"

"I don't know," denied Zia with her hands chasing an invisible insect before her nose. "I just can't do anything right. Nobody understands how I feel. I could rake the walls, I'm so upset."

Maymoona carried her baby stuff to a cradle she had hanged in a closet, and shuffled it underneath. Afterwards, she sat next to her roommate, sitting like a pretzel on the sofa.

She said softly, "Did you meet someone from your family today?"

“My sister. How do you know?”

“Just a guess...” Maymoona said, caressing Zia’s hand in a comforting way. “Take it easy, will you? I mean you always fall for something new, and then you tag along with someone from your family. They disapprove. It is too dangerous, daring, not modest, *haram*, and such and so on. When you return home, you yell at me.”

“Am I so predictable, May?”

Maymoona ignored her question, and said in a higher pitch of voice, “Flippin 'eck! You do not need anyone’s approval!”

“Ya Allah! I do,” said Zia putting her hands around her head, “I DO! I just do.” She grabbed a handful of hair, and pulled before adding, “I would like so much to impress them, to make them feel proud of me, make an impression, you know... I feel like such a failure.”

Maymoona disentangled her friend’s hands and forced her to look up. Zia’s eyes were full of tears. She declared in earnest, “Your problem is you just can’t admit you’re wrong.”

“But I was not wrong, I was NOT wrong. I was just... not seeing things the way she sees things. Why do they all have to see *haram* everywhere?”

She pounded the sofa several times.

Maymoona pursed her lips, “Maybe because nowadays nobody believes anything is *haram*. They balance out.”

Zia smiled.

Maymoona pressed on, “You’re always up to something, Zia. Can’t you just be normal? Settle down with what you have?”

“I am normal, May! Don’t make me feel like I’m not. I’m just curious. Is that a crime?”
And she wrapped her arms around her head again.

Maymoona pulled on Zia's arms to remove them from over her eyes. She warned, "In Islamdale, that may be an injury you do to yourself..."

She brooded. Her roommate came closer, and then put her head over her shiny shawl.

"Did you say 'I seek refuge in God from all evil' when you came in?"

"I forgot."

"Go ahead then, take your anger onto Satan. Go outside, breathe some air and chase Satan away before you come in again. You do not want to bring all these black ideas back in, do you?"

"What about our weird neighbor? I cannot afford crossing the fire on the other side."

"If someone arrives, just pretend you are doing some menu repairs outside," Said Maymoona smiling while enticing her roommate towards the front door.

"And if he asks me to do his door too?" said Zia to mock her attempt.

They laughed a little, and then Zia started to cry silently.

Maymona sighed and took her friend in her arms, "You know what? I have a weird neighbor story too."

"Really?" munched Zia behind a curtain of tears. "Press on..."

"Well... When I lived with my mom, we had our fair share of nutsos, you see. Two neighbors decided to cut this big tree in their backyard themselves. The huge branches fell and broke three surrounding neighbors' fences, including ours, shattered the glass roof of another neighbor's sunroom and destroyed all the vines, fruits and vegetables of another neighbor. And as this was happening, they were cheering on and opening up bottles of beer while everyone was in shock. Another neighbor kept calling the cops for every little thing they did. If they used a car that he didn't recognize in the court, he'd call the cops, even if it was not in his driveway! But on

that day, he just stared at them. They asked him why he did not call the cops, and the man answered - "I'm the cop!" He just got his certificate and was going to use it every day of their lives. The other neighbor then replied "I'm a cop too. Welcome to our backyard.'"

Zia laughed at the idea.

"Why aren't you more like this, Zia?"

"What? You want me to become a cop?"

"No. Take risks. The hell with others!"

They laughed. Zia held her sides out of laughing too hard.

Soon, they turned on the 5-D and they watched something funny to forget about the disappointment of the day.

Yeah, why not ignore the rest of the world? Thought Zia with a certain pleasure. ***At least for now.*** She shook her head and relaxed.

Truths About The Neighbor

The next day, Zia decided to stay home and study for a test. Studying at home? Wrong! The neighbor's door buzzed as usual and Zia tried to debate what she could do about it. Maybe get a bomb and destroy it. Maybe get the neighbor arrested and sent to rehabilitation. Wild scenarios went through her head that were more or less satisfying. Duh, that was not so hard to go get someone to repair the stupid door unless these people were really lazy. After a few hours of trying to concentrate with more or less success, she looked around and unzipped her window. That's when she saw it, a shining new Subair parked right in front of her condo! The nerves!

“Oh, man!” she sighed. As if the buzzing thing was not enough.

She picked up her phone device and mentally dialed her roommate's phone number.

“May!” explained Zia's voice across the telephone line.

“What's up?” answered Maymoona surprised.

“You know what? Our neighbor's car is misplaced.”

Maymoona sighed.

“I need you, May, now. Are you available? I mean, we really need to do something if he thinks our parking space is HIS parking space. I cannot go talk to him alone with those weird guys around, in and on his house and all, I mean all guys! Understand? What do I do? Plus this buzz is driving me insane!”

Maymoona sighed, thought a moment and then declared, “Okay, I'm coming over. I have to go home anyway. Elham is tired of following me around. We'll be there in a few minutes.”

O, yes, thought Zia. Elham. I had forgotten about her. She was easy to forget; she was a quiet little thing. Since Nooria had left for a few days to join Phil on vacation, Maymoona and Zia had offered to look for her.

Maymoona was not very far. In Islamdale, distances were short, and the girls lived on the campus anyway. She and Elham put on their magnetic flat skates and glided to their house without ever lifting one foot. The pressure of their legs was driving the device. The streets of the campus were all the same; they had a magnetic field that also collected the friction when people walked or used their transportation device. The friction was then stored in the carbon fiber cells and reused in order to power lamps along the road or give some propulsion to small machines like the girls' skates. On campus, it was called the Win-win-route because it was self-sustained. Zia saw them coming from a distance. Maymoona was saying hello to a few acquaintances on her way home. She waved and pointed at the car in front of their condo.

When Maymoona pulled over followed by Elham, she stepped down her skates gracefully, took Zia's hand and they walked together to the neighbor's condo. Zia pulled Maymoona's arm back gently.

"What shall we say?" inquired Zia.

"The truth," shrugged Maymoona.

"Who is going to talk to him?"

"I will. He does not intimidate me."

"All right then."

They stepped into the sensor that was designed to project an image of them across the inside door, and then waited for the man to open. Soon, the now familiar buzz of the neighbor's door resonated. A large frame emerged from inside and there he was, the tall imposing figure of the Sikh.

"Ah, hum," started Maymoona smiling broadly. "We are your neighbors, and welcome to our community."

He kept looking at them in surprise but did not answer.

A pregnant silence settled between them. Zia started to fidget and felt really uncomfortable.

He finally nodded and was about to close the door back on them when Zia put her foot in the door.

“Well...” she said. “You’re blocking our driveway. That’s what it is.”

“Me?” said the man puzzled and now smiling back broadly at Maymoona, amused.

The girls showed him the shiny Subair. He walked past them, interested. He was very tall, at least five inches taller than Zia, and his chest area seemed very developed, so much indeed that Zia felt like a twig he could easily pick up and throw away. She looked at him closely as he examined the car.

“No, not mine, and not one of my friends’ either.”

“Okay, thanks. We’ll take your word for it,” said Maymoona a little flirtatiously while pulling Elham to the side.

What is Maymoona doing? Is she out of her mind? Hmm, maybe it is the turban that gives the impression of being tall, thought Zia as she measured the height of their shoulders mentally. And this tunic was really not a tunic but a heating device designed to be worn in public when one caught a cold. *So, he is not so impressive after all,* she convinced herself, *just a matter of... appearances.*

The man examined the car some more and then declared matter of factly, “Actually I walk; I do not have any vehicle.” And he winked at the teenager.

Maymoona could not repress a few giggles when Elham hid behind her. She raised her hands up in defeat and was ready to defend herself when they heard a loud cry.

“Hey, yo!”

Suddenly, a black woman appeared on the driveway with a mean look in her eyes. She wore a white suit profoundly contrasting with her ivory skin. Darker lines seemed to bulge under her eyes. And she looked angry.

She yelled again, “Yo! Yes, yo!” pointing at the Sikh.

It was Mrs. Stalk! She was the same woman who had written the UFO messages on her lawn.

She continued yelling at them even before she reached them, “What the f**** are you looking at?”

The Sikh was a quiet sort of a guy, so he replied gently, “What is wrong with looking at something nice?”

Soon that turned into quite a nasty argument. The woman got half into the vehicle that was parked in front of their house and then began to say, still pointing with her finger,

“You people are Muslims... right? You want to kill the non-Muslims, don't you?” And then she began to call all the black people in the street... by shouting, “Look, look, come here everybody, these Muslims want to kill us.”

A few students showed up and then preferred to leave, shrugging their shoulders. As they were doing so, she began to say, “I saw it on the screen last night... it said you want to kill us... and you kidnapped our people.”

“Er, not me,” declared Elham innocently; I was with aunt May all the time.”

“Yo all samo, yo.”

Zia felt pretty shocked and didn't know what to say. Soon, the neighbor pushed Zia, Elham and Maymoona towards their house. Zia saw him putting his arm gently around

Maymoona's shoulder before he signaled Zia to move back. At the same time, he was trying to tell Mrs. Stalk to get lost and go away. Zia tried to resist, not wanting to miss any part of it, but the Sikh was determined to protect them from any danger. She found the situation fascinating.

The woman, encouraged, kept calling him back saying, "Come here, come here," while he was pushing the girls into their house. In the end, she grunted, got in the car and drove off.

"Man!" exclaimed Maymoona in shock when she had left. "What is this world coming to? She looks pretty professional and educated... and not drunk... now what in the world has made her mind go all crazy? Is this what the screen does to people's psychology, behavior and attitude? What a shame."

"Well," said the Sikh, "Islam nowadays has produced more than enough excesses out of its name to make other people have a very negative view of that, and as long as nothing is done about the claims of abusers of religion, that will continue."

Zia became all red and exclaimed, "I am proud to be a Muslim! You guy has a problem with Muslims?"

The man's eyes opened wide. "So am I," he said to the utter dismay of the girl.

"So, you are... Muslim, like us?" exclaimed Zia.

"Sure. And proud to be."

"Really?" said Maymoona mockingly towards Zia. "You're not Sikh?"

"Sikh? God forgive me, no," answered the man amused.

Zia finally said, intimidated, "This is sisters May, Elham. I'm sister Zia."

Maymoona interrupted them, cutting the introductions short, "Since we are all Muslims, I declare, I am Thankful to Allah, but I will and never want a MUSLIM to be PROUD!"

"Why not, sister?" the man asked.

“Because there isn’t much we can be proud of.”

The man squinted his eyes and said, “Choose your words carefully, sister! Choose wisely... Actually I’m Muslim and I’m SoOoOo PROUD of that.”

“I’m choosing my words carefully, brother. I don’t understand what’s in my words annoying you. I’M OF BEING MUSLIM, but I see most of Muslims nowadays as misled and far away from Islam. So, I’m not proud about that.”

Zia intervened to defend her best friend, “I think May means that Islam is a humble religion that doesn’t condole pride... even though I am Muslim and proud of it. This is good and the way I understood from the events mentioned in Quran about proud is actually from Evil or Satan! It’s not a thing that God likes at all nor any of His Prophet ever did! So, I think even from social point of view being proud means you actually ignore others from certain angles!”

The man disagreed, “It’s everyone’s right to be proud of their achievements. To be a Muslim is the greatest achievement a human can get, so I think there is nothing wrong with neither your statement nor your intentions. If people can’t get the right meaning from the right word that is what is not liked by God and our Prophet. And being a Muslim means being supportive to others.”

Zia smiled, “I kind of agree with you.”

Maymoona concluded, “Islam is a blessing. It is a gift from Allah. We didn’t do things or made things to be proud of. In fact, you are right, we should only be thankful to Allah.”

“Anyway,” added Zia trying to change the conversation, “I am puzzled to find the neighbor’s Subair parked in front of our condo. Come on, the girl hates us. That does not make sense. Is she trying to rub it in or what?”

The brother asked, “Is she the neighbor next to us?”

“No! She is not the next door’s neighbor, but the neighbor across the street!”

Elham closed her arms and chimed in, “Is she afraid of bird’s droppings?”

Zia heaved, feeling her chest contracting. “Very perceptive! I haven’t thought of that! Of course, with a brand new vehicle. I really tried to like her and be open and be patient, but she is too much for me. This person really pushes off my love buttons.”

“Is it the first time this happened?” asked the man incredulous.

“Listen. She changed her Sub. I did not know she had. My mistake.”

He looked at Zia strangely.

“Okay... Actually, she has been doing this for a while,” admitted Zia.

“So, I’m trying to understand here. Why did you come see me?”

Maymona shifted a little embarrassed before she explained, “Okay, brother. We did not think she could afford that kind of car.”

“I see.”

Zia tried to turn the conversation around once more. She did not want to keep repeating she had made a mistake. She said in a friendly tone, “She is so aggressive, I mean... just try to ignore her for a while, okay?”

“I’ll be patient. I encourage you to be patient too, sister.”

That was too much for her. Zia’s anger mounted up. “Come on!! Do we have to park every time on her side of the street where all the trees and birds are? ... Unreal! Arrrggghhh! Look, she hates me. Proof? Look!”

“Tsk, ts, tsk... What did you sisters do to this poor woman for making her hate you?” humored the man.

“I have never done anything to this woman aside from ignoring her,” exploded Zia. “I

mean she's so weird, rude, inconsiderate, chose your option!"

"Hmm. Aren't Muslims supposed to make sure all their neighbors are okay and be courteous, Zia?" smiled Maymoona ironically and falling into the brother's mood.

"Yeah," encouraged Elham.

"I am not perfect," continued Zia unaware, "but I do not feel the need to have a love in with people just because they live next to me!"

"Sure," said the brother stepping back, ready to get back in his condo. He smiled with a slightly mocking sigh. She sure had proven her point with him these past weeks.

Maymoona insisted, grinning, "*You will not have faith until you want for others what you want for yourself, hey?*"

Zia felt slightly offended but decided to end the argument.

"Have a nice day, brother. Peace be upon you."

"Peace be upon YOU, sisters," said the man shrugging his shoulders and buzzing off the door in front of them.

Once he disappeared, Zia's frustration curbed on her friend, "Back up a smudge, will you, May? I don't really talk to any of these neighbors, so it's not like she is singled out. She even has her whole family shooting me the stink eye now. I don't have to be the bigger person here either."

Maymoona tried to calm her down. "Say good morning, hello that short of stuff, you know... just to acknowledge her. Who could be hurt by that? Be friendly, it's not that bad could be worst. You guys used to be friends..."

"Please, May, do not remind me!" pleaded Zia annoyed.

"One plus for me is that I always feel safe with someone looking at my house," remarked

Maymoona teasingly. She smiled at Elham and Elham smiled back.

“Sure! Have you ever heard the saying ‘good fences make good neighbors?’”

“Nope, but I’m hearing it now.” Maymoona offered, grinning again.

Zia offered, “I mean, between the prejudiced Mister Man, the sexually non-Islamically oriented, the bugs deliverers, the crime oriented buzzers and the crack pots, I thank my mom to always telling us: ‘Do not talk to strangers unless Mom says it’s okay.’”

“Well, I’ve been raised where there are a lot of people like that. I don’t feel threatened easily, but I understand where you are coming from.”

Zia looked back towards the brother’s condo and was about to ask a question to Maymoona when Anne suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She wore a skimpy skirt with a lace tattoo on her back. She walked slowly toward the girls, saying, “Is the Sikh actually a Muslim?”

“Yep.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that. I will just state the real fact. If you are staying in Western countries, just look around. Most of modern or non-Arab countries hate Muslims. Just ask around opinions of non-Muslims. Blacks, Whites, Asians, Caucasians... they don’t like each other much, but all of them hate Muslims. Everything Muslims do, they are suspicious.”

“Yep,” answered Zia uncomfortably.

“Does he think you are Muslims too?”

“Yep,” answered Maymoona with an understood grin towards her roommate.

“Good for you! At least, he won’t be bothering you. You know what? As far as Mrs. Stalk is concerned, solution: Put A LOT of NAILS where this bitch usually parks as long as it doesn’t affect where you drive. She’ll get sick of flat tires! Did you ever let her know about what you think of her vehicle parked under your nose?”

“We wrote a stern but respectful letter and placed it on her Subair once,” admitted Zia.

“Didn’t help a bit.”

“Hmm,” continued Maymoona. “Do you have a few other ideas cooking if the nail does not resolve things? I’d like to look at all my options.”

“Well, why don’t you just put a sprinkler on your front lawn? Or put a big rock there? She’ll probably be too lazy to move it and just park elsewhere. Or do like we do in Boston - just put a chair or a cone out there and if anyone moves it, you slash their tires.”

They laughed a little bit uncontrollably. It felt good to let the pressure out.

“Sugar in the gas tank works well too,” added Anne’s girlfriend coming out of the house. “The car will leave, but it probably won’t make it back.”

Double laughter.

“I will tell you that one time my dad pulled up and parked so close to the neighbors’ Subair that they had to crawl in the other side or come to our door in order to get to their car... they crawled in the other side... didn’t have the nerve to come to the door... but it did stop it for a few weeks. My dad told me a saying a long time ago. It goes like this: ‘If you find a fool... bump their head. You will do them a favor.’ And you know what? When we’re having these problems with a ‘neighbor’ and we asked a city police officer what could be done, his solution was burn their house down. So, if the police says it’s okay, why not?”

Tears came to the eyes of the girls, they were laughing so much. After a while, Anne added in a more serious tone.

“You know what, pals? The prices in that neighborhood are going up, and that will be enough to keep most of the riff raff out.”

“It depends on what you consider riff raff?” intervened Zia. “People who paint their

shutters purple? People who hang their laundry to dry in the backyard? People who work on cars in their driveways that aren't visible to the street? None of that would bother me as long as they were quiet and kept the visible areas of their properties clean and well maintained.”

Maymoona answered with a tint of humor, “All I expect from my neighbors is for them to be courteous, to be quiet at night and in the early mornings, to keep their visible front/side/back yards clean and landscaped, to keep up routine maintenance on their homes, and if they are having a party, please invite me!”

Zia suppressed an outraged laugh, and she said with a stain of sadness in her voice, “Centuries ago, neighbors could talk to one another to resolve problems. We live in a very different age. Have tried the talking approach, and have seen some other neighbors do the same... some people claim, ‘this is America and we can do whatever we want to,’ which tells me that those people do not care about their neighbors’ concerns. I have also heard more than once someone getting shot at while going to their neighbors’ door to ask them to turn down the music, and another neighbor going to his neighbor's door about a concern, with the outcome of the concerned and requesting neighbor having a "no trespassing" warning issued on him.....just for talking to his neighbor and making a request of him. So, those of you who think talking to your neighbor should be the first approach that is not always the wisest idea. Wish it could be that simple.”

They all nodded.

Anne thought for a moment and suddenly had an idea, “Another trick is to plant something attractive but with thorns where they park or walk. Many years ago, the next door boys were playing football out front when my dad was napping. He had a night job and was really exhausted. They sometimes ran into our yard and shouted, awaking him. We created a nice

garden, with a tree at the sidewalk and roses between that and the house. Problem solved.”

“Sure,” agreed his boyfriend, “I’ve seen very nice rock gardens in Texas. Who wants to step out onto a cactus? Or lots of pebbles, which can be hard to walk on?”

“Right,” said Maymoona. “Next time we have our neighborhood watch meeting, I’ll vote for you.”

#

Night was coming down fast and by now the next door’s brother’s visitors had all left one by one. Zia was glad they had avoided the Muslim are you or are you not conversation with Anne and her roommate, but she was not happy the way her conversation with the brother had ended. She wanted to know more. Her curiosity was picked.

What’s going on in his house? she thought late into the night. *It’s a relief to know he is Muslim; that makes us feel safer, but why are so many men showing up at his condo? One day, we’ll have to ask him.* Although she was less worried now about the attic thing because they had cleaned it and there was no real reason to bring this up, she still questioned her neighbor and his activities. Being Muslim made things easier but more personal. She was going to feel watched all the time and maybe judged. She did not know either to be happy or unhappy this brother chose to live next door to them. When she told her roommate, that made Maymoona grin a lot.

“So what, Zia? When you thought he was Sikh it was too scary, but now that you know he is Muslim, that’s too problematic? You might have a neighbor’s phobia, do you know that?”

Zia did not answer to sarcasm. She frowned and went to bed. The hell with the neighbors, all of them!

Baptizing The Cat

Some days later, Anne, Zia's classmate, knocked at Zia's wall at the opposite side of the front door as she always did. Zia cracked the wall open and opened her eyes wide.

"Hey! I've got their cat!" beamed Anne holding a stray cat in her arms. "Would you help me baptize it? I can't sink it in."

"Ugh! May I have this poor kitty?" answered Zia lifting the trembling animal and cradling it in her arms. This gave her time to think about what she would say next. Anne had come very early in the morning and she had spent part of the night talking with Elham about this and that. She was tired.

She suddenly realized what Anne was talking about. "Baptize it? Really!?" she asked Anne. "Why would you want to do that to a CAT?"

"Jesus was sent to save all of us, didn't he? And I mean all of us."

"Dang... Are you crazy, girl?"

She frowned. "I left the door open for that one, didn't I?" asked Anne with a doubt in her voice.

Zia suddenly lost it. She was tired of crazy people's behaviors. She had had enough of passing for who she was not. This had to end. All at once, she realized that she had nothing to gain from a relationship with people like Anne who was very close-minded. What was wrong with just being what she was?

She blurted out with a feeling of relief, "The Bible was not written to provide an endless resource of catching out of context sounds bites and own liners. In my experience, the ones who water down the word of God are generally those with compromised lives. Let's see what you can come away with next, dude."

Anne looked shocked.

“At least I do not make sure I make all those “good Muslims” friends of yours, you know... all the moderate, peace loving ones... feel secure in their neighborhoods, so they will never inquire about the Truth.”

Of course, she was referring to the brother next door.

“Never mind,” Zia said exasperated. “Go back home and leave their cat alone!”

At the same time, someone buzzed at the front door. Zia pushed Anne away, closed the wall and lightly walked towards the peephole and looked outside. On the other side of the door, a little man in full regalia stood nervously.

What is it with these Muslims and the “tuxedo”? she thought unbelieving.

Zia put a scarf on her head and finally opened the door still holding the cat, and asked, “How can I help you, brother?”

The little man looked at her a little embarrassed and then blurted out, “Would you have the key of the mosque? I seem to have lost mine.”

Zia at first did not register what he was saying. Could her ears be deceiving her? She stood gazing at him and shook her head while she managed to say.

“I’m sorry, brother. Next door maybe.”

A mosque? Zia would have never thought of that. A mosque? Of course! She suddenly realized she had been doubly wrong about the neighbor.

She said with a big lump in her throat, “I’m sorry.”

The little brother nodded, down casting his eyes and buzzed the next door. No one answered. The man fidgeted and then darted out of the hall nervously. *Probably a new convert*, Zia thought, *I should have invited him inside for his prayers*. But of course he would have

declined; they could not have prayed together in any rate.

Elham joined her new roommate, picked out of the door, looked at the brother's back then at Zia and declared, "So, the neighbor's condo is a mosque? No wonder so many men are drawn in here!"

"Yep, you're right, Elie," declared Zia zipping the door back.

Zia was still stunned by her new discovery when Nooria called her.

"*Assalam alaikum*, Zia. How is Elham doing?"

"Thanks for asking about me," teased Zia. "She's here. Do you want to talk to her?"

"No, no. I just wanted you to fill me in with the last news."

"You mean the neighbor? Did May tell you anything?"

"Yes, she did! I am so glad for your gals. A Muslim for neighbor? Let's celebrate when I come back. You gals got me worried for a spin with the popping ceilings and the daggers and all."

"Who would have guessed?" said Zia guiltily.

"Right."

"You know what? We just learned that the next door is a mosque."

"No kidding? Even better. You guys are really blessed. All these Muslim men and a mosque? Double protection. Double choice."

She laughed. She sounded merry and relaxed. Zia smiled, happy for her. She asked, "So, I presume you and Phil made it up?"

"We did! He is okay with Elham too. And he agrees, no doctors anymore. I'm really glad you came with me to the Happy Whatever Group."

"I didn't do anything."

“But you did. You gave me the courage to go, and it just clicked for me. I just wanted you to know I am glad you’re my sister.”

“Sure,” answered Zia proudly. “Any time.”

“By the way, I’ll be back tomorrow for the lifeware test. Bring Elham, will you?”

“No problem.”

“Okay, got to go. Phil is waiting. We’re going on a hike today; whatever that means,” she said laughing.

“I’m happy for you, Nooria. Love ya. Take care.”

“*Wassalam.*”

“*Salam, sis.*”

Zia hanged up by removing her earpiece and told Elham, “Nooria is doing great. She sends her *salam* to you.”

“Good,” reply Elham indifferently.

“Ahem. I guess we’ll have to wait for him.”

“Who?” asked Elham incredulous.

“The neighbor. Yeah. We still have to return the cat, don’t we? Not that I really want to talk to him again.”

“Why not? He’s nice.”

“I guess I have a lot to be forgiven for. All these days I imagined he was Sikh and that he had some kind of illegal business going on in his house. I almost caused trouble for him. What kind of a Muslim am I? I was suspicious, judgmental. I feel so guilty.”

“I guess I would to,” agreed Elham picking up some magazines’ pads.

“Yep.” Zia kept her ears opened for the next door’s neighbor’s buzz. She had to return the cat even though it might not be his, but most of all, she wanted to know him better. She was intrigued. Why would this man use his house for a mosque? Was he an *imam*? The leader of a new sect? He had to be. But no. Zia had been so many times wrong about the man, she had to have learned something here. She felt sorry she had taken him for whom he was not. That was embarrassing. She felt curious about the new *imam* now that she knew he was okay.

O my, she realized in a second, I need a proper hijab.

She went to her closet and sought around for a few minutes, holding the cat tighter in her arms. She wished she had a petophone to talk to this cat; she wished she could tell it it was okay. She did not want the animal to escape and go hide in a hole somewhere in the apartment. The cat waved its paws into the air, visibly trying to scratch her, but she was used to her mom’s pet and shifted it to hold on tightly to its back skin. She remembered cat’s claws as being very painful. She soon found the proper covering and put it on. The cat was kicking now with its rear legs. Zia ran into the living room, shouting,

“Quick, Elie, give a bag or something to put the cat in. It is getting out of control.”

“I’ll take it,” said Elham with assurance.

She picked it up under its belly and gently scratched its neck.

“Nice kitty kitty, nice.”

The cat settled down and soon turned around in circles on her lap to make a place to sit.

“Amazing, Elie, how did you do that?”

“Animals like me. I used to live on a lab farm.”

“Really? I guess there is a lot more about you I need to learn about.”

“I guess so.”

Suddenly, the brother's front door buzzed. Zia sighed and gestured to the teen to bring the cat on. She came quickly, jumping to her feet with excitement. Zia looked at her in surprise. What was she all happy about?

A few minutes later, the brother zipped down his door and his imposing frame took up all the space. There was no way she could get used to his shape, that anybody could get used to it for that matter. His gaze fell on the poor cat, and his eyes grew bigger. His brows seemed to thicken under what looked like a frown. He did not try to take the cat in and that worried Zia for a second. Where could she start?

She showed the cat with some hesitation and asked with a crooked smile, "A friend of yours?"

"It seems," he answered not moving a bit.

"Well, won't you take it?"

He shook his head and called to the back of the apartment, "Layla! I think we've found what you were looking for..."

A little girl came running towards them and stopped behind the brother's massive frame. She looked like a mushroom at the roots of a tree. She did not resemble him; she was cute like a bud and quite shy.

"Hello," she said twisting a finger in her mouth and concealing her face in the *imam's* robe.

"*Salam alaikum,*" said Zia in her direction, and bending over, she whispered, "I rescued your cat from a very mean lady."

Elham handed her the cat and she took it very gently over her shoulder. The cat scrambled over her head and darted into the house. The little girl did not move or intent to run

after the animal; she just stared at Zia who smiled at her.

“Who is she?” she asked Waqar while hiding her face in his shalwar.

Zia did not let him answer; she blurted out, “I’m Zia.”

The *imam* looked at her intently. The little girl searched his eyes for an answer, but a rictus appeared on his face instead. He clearly was looking for a way to answer her.

“So you know my auntie May?” asked the little girl suddenly eager, her arms now holding the man’s leg firmly in a tiny grip.

“I... Hum... Yes”

Zia gasped. She looked intently toward the man with big wide eyes.

“Ahem, Laylah, go play with Elham, will you?” said the brother uncomfortable, and he shooed her away with a kiss on the top of her head.

“All right, uncle Waqar. Bye Zia,” said Elham running after the little girl.

What? Uncle Waqar? Zia felt a shiver running through her body and her head span at the rhythm of her quickened heart beat. She blushed. So, he was what? May’s brother? Impossible, May had only one sister; she was sure of it. Husband maybe? This was probably his daughter from a previous marriage. Co-wives were commonly called aunties. She was sure Mia was May’s first child. I’m dreaming... thought Zia very uncomfortable. Why is May living next door to her husband? Why does she hide his identity and pretend she does not know him? Questions perused her mind for a few minutes. It did not look like he was in a hurry to answer them either.

“So, you are The Brother Waqar... from the TIMnasium? The new *imam*?” asked Zia to make sure she was not imagining.

He nodded. She squeezed a finger at the corner of her mouth in a very pretty way, and she started turning around when his cavernous voice stopped her motion.

“I know your dad, you know?”

“Yep,” she quickly answered facing him again and looking down at her feet, “You know my dad.”

He waited for her to add more, but she kept on tracing an invisible line on the floor with her foot.

She finally said, “Well... This isn’t a joke, is it?”

She took courage and looked up at him. His eyes were iridescent and a thick licorice layer of eyelashes made the sparkles in his eyes look like constellations. She could barely refrain from saying ‘wow, that’s how a real *imam* looks like. That’s how May’s husband looks like.’

She finally said, “That’s cool that we live next to each other.”

“Really?”

“Yep, I also want to become an *imam*...”

“Well, sister, the *hijab* is a good start...”

She looked away embarrassed and tried to look interested in what was going on in the house to refrain from crying. So what? He had noticed her new *hijab*? Big deal. She would have thought he would be indifferent. But why did she put it on? She felt a little bit ridiculous. *Well*, she thought, *better now than never*.

“Obviously, well, uh...” she faltered, “I’d like to be a religious leader you know, and... uh... I’m just learning.”

He pinned her with his eyes like an insect under the hands of a collector. Zia realized he must have met dozens of people like her before who were interested in this career and were looking up to him. Scholars were rare like orchids, and people probably had a hard time containing their excitement when they met him. He continued to stare at her with complete

confidence, and that was unsettling.

“I’d like... uh... some advice,” she added even more uncomfortable and ready to run back to her apartment. She rubbed her arms nervously.

He answered calmly and in a way each one of his words weighted a ton on Zia’s heart, “Well, women do not become *imam* in Islam, you should know that.”

“Sure they do!” burst Zia as if she was busting the Zen bubble that had started to grow around her.

“Well, not in my dictionary.”

“Who do you think you are?” she interjected angrily. “There are so few men left. Women need leaders, and they cannot always wait for men; they need a leader to lead them to prayer and lecture them.”

“O, I’m sorry, sister. Sure, sure... if you mean to be a women’s *imam* only, that’s another problem. It’s actually fine. Still, men are better placed for this job.”

Zia’s heart throbbed at her temples. She turned her hands into fists and tried to unclench them alternatively. She waited to be more composed to answer, “You know what? Few men are really worth being followed. What makes you sure you are worth being followed?”

He smiled briefly and agreed silently. He finally said, slowly detaching his words,

“A woman *imam*? We’ll see that, Zia. That’s your name, isn’t it?”

She nodded assent and said proudly,

“Bint Abdu.”

“So, Misses Zia Bint Abu...” he humored in the most shocking and unsettling way that was so out of character. “I will see you tomorrow at your dad’s lab if you are still planning on trying out the desert lifeware.”

She nodded and turned around.

“*Salam*,” she said as if it was an afterthought.

He did not answer, but Zia could feel the door was still open. She pivoted. He was still frowning.

“And peace be upon you,” he declared with a forced smile.

Then he zipped up the door. Zia had just a few seconds to notice the little girl playing with Elham and the cat. She even heard the little Laylah pull on Elham’s arm and ask excitedly, “Come play with me in the attic.” The cat did not wear a petophone like her mom’s cat wore. That was unusual. Now that Zia was thinking about it, she did not even feel the need to greet their cat as she would have with any other animal. She started towards her door, but turned back one more time. She wondered a few seconds if she had to explain that Anne had tried to drown their cat. If the cat could talk to them, they could misinterpret what had happened. *No, they do not have any petophone or they would have installed it on the cat permanently*, she thought, *and besides, no way I am going to knock at this door a second time. This man is way too intimidating, I just can’t quite picture May with him.*

She thought about it a little bit more. *Well, he is not really scary once we get over his physical appearance, but he is so, how would I say, so... so... true. Yeah! True.* Nobody was true anymore. Meeting someone who was really true was like very scary, very intimidating, very unsettling, very unnatural. *I’d settle for unnatural*, pondered Zia still looking at the *imam*’s door. *And May is so secretive. Gee, how did she have hide all of this from me all these weeks? Why?*

She zipped herself in and was about to call Maymoona when she heard a series of pops across the ceiling. Laylah and Elham were having a good time in the attic. Zia put down the earpiece. She was going to let it pass for now. She felt very exhausted. Too many news in one

day.

The VR Simulator

It was fall and the cold dry wind was hard to tolerate in Islamdale. Summer had passed very rapidly; the months seemed to have lasted only a few weeks. Zia's birthday would come soon and she would be eighteen. Her family did not celebrate birthdays, but on that day, they usually gathered to thank Allah for all their blessings.

Zia was thinking about this when she stood at the entrance of her dad's lab. She was sure she wanted something to mark her birthday this year. This year, there was a lot to be remembered. She would now be considered an adult. She could keep her condo. Her wildest dream, meeting a real *imam*, had been answered but not the way she had expected. She had a new little sister. And Maymoona owed her a lot for keeping her little secret. Obviously, her roommate did not want anybody to know Waraq was her husband. Apparently her dad shared in the secret because he was going to let Brother Waraq test the new lifeware with Nooria and her. Even Maymoona was invited. She could hardly imagine Maymoona in dad's lab. What on earth for? How many mysteries were there? Flowers would be nice though. Somehow, she had started dreaming of flowers, colorful flowers slowly opening under the bright sparkly sun. She could see the yellow pistils dangling under their own weight. Flowers were these rare natural occurrences that did not exist anymore except in special nurseries. She dreamed about possessing one, caressing one and feeling its velvety petals. She remembered the books she had read about them; her dad had sent her one when she was younger and it had triggered a great passion in her. Actually, her bedroom back home was incrustated with crystal replicas of all kinds of flowers she had modeled for crafts. More than ever now, she wished she could have this authentic feel and she could smell the non artificial fragrances from nature. She was weary of manmade buildings and decorations. Even though the TIMnasium had the most delicate paintings of nature miniatures running along its

columns, it just was what it was, just a building, not real. Her heart stirred in her chest, and her longing was almost unbearable. *Please, Dad, offer me a flower for my birthday*, she whispered as she leaned on the door of the lab and closed her eyes.

Nooria suddenly interrupted her thoughts by pressing her wrist on the detector, and the lab's door bailed behind her.

“*Assalam alikum*, Zia? What were you looking for? Something's wrong?”

Zia shook her head and faintly smiled.

“So...” declared Nooria completely insensitive to her sister's mood and trembling with excitement, “this is it?”

Zia smiled approvingly, devoid of words and not willing to speak at the moment so that she could keep her deep feelings bottled up inside. There were comforting to her at the moment; it was her new Zen state.

Nooria continued, “We're testing the new VR!” Zia did not answer. She hesitated, “Er... V for virtual, R for reality... you know? O, I can't wait, Zia.”

She turned towards her sister and pressed her hands on her sister's arms as if to wake her up. Nooria's palms were really burning as if she had some kind of a fever. Zia wondered what happened during the little vacation. She had never seen her sister so enthusiastic before, so.. um.. happy...

The darkness in the room slowly cleared and both girls started to notice Clark and their dad working on setting up the new project.

“You did not take Elham with you?” asked Nooria in surprise.

“Oh, she's here,” exclaimed Zia.

“Where?”

“May brought her with her. They must be here, somewhere.”

They both looked back in the direction of the men. They squinted their eyes and started to see more of the room. Their dad had disappeared. Clark was now showing Elham how to manipulate remote control robots.

“Here she is!”

Zia walked briskly towards the table and sat down with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Nooria followed her and picked up a flat remote from the table.

“I hope you don’t mind, Zia?” said Clark with a broad smile. “Elham came in early and I thought she would like to try out my toys.”

She shrugged her shoulders. She looked around and finally saw Maymoona and Waraq busy putting on their virtual suits. Looking at him sent an uncomfortable sting down her stomach and she immediately felt mad at herself for having these feelings.

Maymoona gestured towards Zia for her to come. Her eyes were shiny as if she had put on lenses.

“What did you do to your eyes,” asked Zia intrigued.

‘O, that’s just part of the lifeware. Your dad says it helps seeing colors we cannot see or imagine anymore. It looks really weird right now; I hope it gets better when we get into the simulator. So... you guys have talked?’ she said turning towards Waqar.

Zia was glad he was too busy testing the VR to hear. Zia looked aside and started to fidget, no knowing what to say and where to begin.

“I know I haven’t been totally honest with you. I’m sorry, Zia. It was strictly for security reasons.”

Zia looked straight at her friend with a puzzled expression, “Security?”

“See, lots of people dislike Waqar.”

“But a lot of people love him.”

“I know that you admire him, Zia, you’re like out of this world; you do not see things as they are.”

“I do not know if I should take this as an insult or a compliment.”

“What I mean is that, inside, you are a good person, and you are a dreamer.”

Zia winced. She was true.

Maymoona continued, “See, a lot of people think there should not be any more scholars. They could use me and my child to persuade him to stop preaching. Do you remember this Yoga teacher?”

“Miss Munira?”

“Yeah. She is part of the new generation of false scholars. It is part of a plan.”

“But we have books!”

“True enough. Who can read, Zia?”

“So, why did Brother Waqar come here? I am sure there are places he is welcomed.”

“He came here to see me. He was supposed to stay just a few weeks. There was no reason to tell you. The less people knew the better, you see?”

“I see. But it was official.”

“Yes, I know. Your dad wanted him to participate in the creation of this new lifeware. He had to make this official to get the authorization. Actually, to make this lifeware, your dad have been copying memories from Waqar’s brain to add to the lifeware. It’s all official.”

“So, why did he stay more?”

“Mia. She was born premature. She is still at the clinic and he desperately wants to meet

her before he goes. Of course, he can't be seen at the clinic. As soon as I bring her home, he'll leave."

"I definitely can understand this, but... but... go, where?" asked Zia sad to learn waqar was going away soon.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I'm telling the truth, Zia. The less I know, the safest it is for him. You understand, don't you? Please, do not tell anyone. Okay?"

Zia turned the new information several time in her head before nodding. She was afraid. Here she was, her dream was to become and *imam*, and there were all these people out there ready to get her! What was the future for her dream?

"Did anyone try to hurt him?" she finally asked, her voice trembling despite herself.

"Well, they are waiting for him to make a mistake."

"What sort of mistake?"

"Something that would compromise him."

"Like what?"

"Well, like... becoming really active. That sort of things. He is disturbing enough as he is. The dress modestly, talk true sermons are a great deal for people to take, so he just limits himself to this. Everybody is happy."

"I see..."

So, she could be an *imam* after all. She was not into politics. She felt strangely reassured.

A few minutes later, everybody jumped into their lifeware suits and Clark went around each person to check on the connections. All was well.

They were immediately plunged into the desert life. The air smelled light and fresh. The sky was blue and Zia had to blink hard in order to get used to the sunlight. A few grains of sand swatted them at intervals. Sand devils swiftly passed along. Short, dry herbs grew around emaciated trees. But all about the white dunes sparkled infinitely.

“What is this place called, Dad?” asked Zia.

“The Sahara. A dead part of our history.”

“Why this place?”

“Br. Waqar thought of this place because... well, he can tell you himself.”

“No distractions,” answered Waqar. “There is no computer, no telephone, no luxury. Everything is reduced to the bare minimum, like faith.”

“Where are you, Brother, I cannot see you.”

“You won’t be seeing me; I will be with the men.”

He was right, Zia could only see Maymoona and Nooria. No men. It was like the traditional Muslim society worked the same way the modern society worked in the year 3000, but maybe not for the same reasons. That was interesting.

Soon, a Bedouin approached the women and saluted them. Her skin was white and her hair was very dark. She had braids emerging from her scarf and her dark blue dress covered her entire body. When she smiled, her teeth were white like pearls. She was lovely. They exchanged names.

She soon asked, “What does Zia mean?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Zia.

Nooria intervened, “Zia and Nooria mean the same: light.”

“What does Ruqayah mean?” asked Zia curious about the girl.

“Ruqayah means the scented tree of the desert,” answered the young girl showing the women visitors the entrance to the dark woolen tent.

“The scented tree of the desert? Are you using special perfumes here?”

She giggled, “Actually it means like a treasure. You see, women can only be seen from a distance by the men. Sometimes, they get only our scent. It is precious to them.”

“You seem to know a lot about men. How do you know this if you never meet one?”

The girl smiled angelically, “Oh, I can tell you anything about men.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we get to know men through poems and campfire stories. Nomads have some occasions to meet too.”

“Okay, let’s try that,” answered Zia excited and feeling at ease. She peered across the camp and saw the silhouettes of the men all draped in blue. Even their faces were covered.

“Okay, well, let’ see. First question? How do you know a man is handsome? What if you ask about it?”

“Men in the desert all cover their faces, but everyone of them will say they are good looking.”

“Why?” asked Zia sitting on the floor crossed legs.

“Because all men think they are handsome. The beauty is in the courage.”

They laughed.

“Good one. Okay. How do you know a man is smart?”

“Men may be smart or not, but a man is always smarter than us women. If he is smarter, he can be in charge.”

“Gosh, this world is so unreal! Where are men this confident?”

“They hunt and watch the herds and travel to trade; we stay in the tents and watch the children.”

That’s the opposite of my world, thought Zia disturbed.

“Okay, how do you know how old a man is?” asked Zia looking again towards the group of men who gathered around cups of tea.

“A man is not old, even if he is a hundred years old. Age is irrelevant.”

“Really? Is this true for women too?”

“No, not true for women. Men want children; they need young women.”

Gosh, this is so just like in my time, reflected Zia. *A woman has an age, but men never; it is irrelevant. But age does not matter for us because most people do not want children anymore.* She looked at Nooria, but Nooria only frowned without saying a word.

Zia continued, “Do men here have several wives? Where I come from it is common, you know.”

“Yuck,” the girl answered. “In theory, it doesn’t bother me. In reality, it just does not work that way. There are enough men for each one of us, but not enough women to have more than one wife. Besides, courting is a lot of effort and women are jealous.”

The day continued in the tents. They finally got off the VR.

Bedouins women were braiding Zia's hair at this time. Zia climbed down the simulator touching her hair but could not feel the braids. It was weird. The whole experience seemed so real. She could have stayed there for days.

"Dad, that was so real," she exclaimed in amazement. "I could feel the warmth and the tugging of their hands. Just amazing."

Nooria added, "I could feel the warmth of the sun and my face hurts. Why is that?"

Dr. Abu replied with a broad smile, "You got a sunburn."

"Amazing. So, that's how it feels," said Nooria thoughtfully.

"Doctor Abu?" asked Maymoona curiously. "I saw something on the ground that walked crookedly. I chased it and when I caught it, only its tail remained in my hand. What was that?"

The searcher smiled contentedly, "That was a lizard."

"Really?"

"And these women," exclaimed Nooria gesturing a lot with her hands. "They were out of this world! This lady let me touch her belly and I could feel the baby's kicks. It was riveting. It was so pure and innocent. She just wanted to share her happiness. Her face was shining and her teeth were so white it made a light on her face. I felt so much love for these women. Dad? How do you create love using a simulator?"

"And the sand by night!" jumped in Maymoona. "It was so cold, but my clothes kept me warm. The women were singing and playing on very rudimentary instruments like the drum. They explained many things I had never heard about like the way the world was built by God.

Zia added, "And when came the night, one woman took my hand and taught me a secret language only Tuaregs know. I cannot explain why I learned it so fast. Maybe I was just completely receptive. Then, she pushed me outside and I almost bumped into a man. I could not

see his face, but the woman said I would know who it was anyway. I saw couples making signs in each other's hand and the man took my hand and tried to say something but the words were not necessary. How did you make this happen, Dad? It was amazing that a Muslim society leaves a man and a woman alone, in the dark."

"Well, did you see inappropriate behaviors?"

Zia reflected a moment, then admitted, "You're right, Dad. I saw that the couples did not touch each other and I could recognize the young women only by the way they laughed and I knew it was no big deal because everybody knew and perceived where everybody else was. We just walked around and looked at the stars. I have never seen that many stars, but I knew what they were and many shooting stars appeared in the sky. This lifeware is so real, I felt like I wanted to stay there forever."

"That's the point," said her dad mysteriously.

"The point?" asked Nooria dumbfounded.

"Exactly," intervened Brother Waqar. "If a lifeware can create such desire in your heart, then maybe more people will want to start loving others around them. Faith is love, love for God. If someone does not know how to love, then how can she love God? That's the whole point of this lifeware."

Dr. Abu looked at Clark, his assistant and asked unexpectedly, "What do you think, Clark?"

They all looked at Clark. They were burning to hear about the man's side.

"Well, I helped build the program, so I knew what to expect, but when I was inside, I felt differently; it was like the program had a soul." Everybody leaned and hanged on his words. Clark continued, "The men talked about battles, but not the video gamers' way. They talked of

honor and the way they would spare their enemy if they could. They talked about the exertion of the battle and how they felt spent and strong. I felt total empathy. Battles suddenly made sense. It was not purposeless like the ones we know; it had more meaning. For instance, they talked about never running after the enemy because there was no dignity in striking in the back. And they used only weapons that needed skills to handle. I felt very cowardly thinking of our high tech and how we do war sitting in our chairs when other people suffer. But this was real, the exertion that felt good, the adrenaline, the pang of pride. I felt more of a man there. They also talked of deserted camps when the men gathered somewhere else and left a camp full of women unprotected. They knew that nobody would be as low to attack defenseless women. I was touched. I did not work on this part of the programming. I am glad I didn't." Clark looked up at the two other men. He continued, "Dr. Abu and Brother Waqar worked on it together. I knew that Waqar is a religious person, but I did not expect this. The simulator made me in touch with the humanity in us."

Zia swallowed. She smiled weakly and decided to get things off her chest, "These women had so much. They did not have to sacrifice a lot. They did not have to experience their feelings being hurt over and over again. They did not have to sacrifice their time with their husband, or sacrifice anything for that matter. I mean maybe if we had the serenity these women have, we could be less stressed out; it would be therapeutic. Did you create this lifeware for women to meet a virtual husband? Because that could be like so therapeutic for some women."

Her dad nodded with a big grin on his face.

"Yeah," thought Nooria aloud. "The lifeware also tells us how to get along with other women without feeling like we have to be rivals."

"Sure," humored Maymoona. "Also, more interesting discussions, less cleaning up."

Everybody pitches in. Greater support system. etc The dream!”

Everybody laughed.

“What bothers me,” confessed Maymoona, is that this is all bogus. You have created a world that is so beautiful, it is addictive. Wasn’t the idea to stop the addiction to technology?”

“Actually,” answered Dr. Abu with conviction, “ Brother Waqar knows of a secret Muslim hiding place that looks like that. Such a world exists in the real life.”

“What? Where?” exclaimed all the participants at the same time.

Maymoona looked at her husband reproachfully. He shrugged.

“People talk about this place far away from the floating cities, on earth, but I always thought it was a myth,” said Maymoona amazed.

“This lifeware idea,” answered Waqar, “is to give people the taste for it. We are looking here at a religious rebirth.”

Everybody went silent. Finally, Zia said, her eyes dreamily looking towards the VR simulator, “A place where we do not have to be scared of our neighbors. A place where women are sisters. A place where God is alive. And it is our first enemy that will give it to us: technology?” She smiled evasively, getting slowly warmed up to the idea. “Way to go!”