

The way to Church.

For Mary every step is a spring-loaded trigger bursting little dense sacks of stored memories, flooding her conscious like a flavoured-gel burst, from inside a wad of gum. But, unlike the gel the memories are not all sweet; some have a cringing sourness to them that sometimes make her want to belch.

Mary's other name is Amina, she is born a Muslim. Amina was an old life, an epoch ago. She identifies herself by the name Mary, but to the rest of the world, outside her bible and her prayers and the dark folds of her burkha, she is still Amina.

An arterial highway splits her village asymmetrically into two. From the central fissure, dendritic unpaved roads radiate out, none as big as the highway. The entire body of them phases out into unclaimed, uncultivated barren land. The highway is the lifeline of the village. The sole purpose of the village is to satisfy the highway travelers- seedy truckers, busloads of pilgrims and vacationing families in white sedans. The primary businesses of the town line the road, which runs from the East and bends to the Northwest as it passes through the center of the settlement. The church is at the Northwest exit of the town and the mosque is just next to it. Her home is at the East entrance: visiting God she means a pilgrimage across town along its artery.

Confined to an unnatural, yet common, prepubescent house arrest, Amina was permitted outside only to the Madrasa and the Mosque. Fridays, the holy day, was special. After *Namaz*, she was treated to ice cream from the store at the corner of her street as a reward for her compliance and belief in God, but she did not really understand God or theism at that young age, thus all things holy meant melting ice cream under the shady palm fronds that covered the rock next to the ice cream shop. The rock was just at the right angle and the right size for her to sit on: she doubts if anyone has used that rock for the same purpose she did, since. To her, meditation was the solemn study of the ice cream as she ran a race of useful consumption against wastage: falling droplets that stained

the frock she wore and the rock she sat on. As Mary walks past she looks at it and lets the memory bubble burst. It amazes her how a stone and tree can remain so inanimate after being privy to so many secrets, so many desires and so much frustration for so many years. After all, if that much turmoil could change her life forever, surely the rock would have sunk a little, changed its orientation or at least the texture of its surface. But even her ice cream stains still showed; immortalized by fine dust that clung to rock and fixed itself within the pores; writing on the epitaph of her first twenty years. Her peaceful years. Years that she would not live again.

It was not until Mary was twenty that she was allowed to go without a chaperon into the city. But she still had to be with her group of girlfriends or cousins outside the gates of the house. It was this constant company that inhibited her chances of courting Abaaz, the whistler. He'd hoot at any girl that passed by, even if they were in *burkhas*. Shame was not something he was familiar with. The local rowdy, he was far from the hard working honest, boring men that most fathers approved of for their daughters. But his handsome face, well-built stature and confidence struck a chord with Amina's rebel self. There were nights when she dreamed about him; his arms wrapped around her and how she'd allow him to defile everything her *burkha* was to protect.

As Mary walks past the crossing right after the ice cream store she would look to the right, down the gully, at the tailor's inconspicuous signboard. She often wonder if she could define this as one of the points where her road went awry; if only someone had controlled her, maybe it would have turned out differently.

One day, after long nights of plotting and planning, Amina slipped Abaaz a note at namaaz, 'meet me in half an hour behind the *Darzi* (tailor) shop.' She knew none of her camaraderies would ever search for her there and she'd be safe. She escaped from namaaz and walked the highway until she reached the *Darzi* shop and waited behind it. He did come, finally, ten minutes late. She had planned the meeting to the last tee except for what she wanted to tell him. She relied on her intuition.

“My name is Amina.”

“Listen, what is it? If they catch me like this with you they will stone me. Do you want to shout at me? Do you want a sorry? Here take it, let me go.” He was shivering beyond control, the confidence that he exuded earlier was gone. But it only augmented her awe in him. A confident man scared of the law, wasn't that a hint of wisdom.

She pulled down her jiba, bared her face slightly, it was a naughty feeling, baring her face to a man, an unrelated man. “I love you and want to be with you, do you too? If you do, lets get married?”

Later she regretted this impulsiveness, but at that moment she thought she had grown up.

A week later he had arrived at her house, to ask her father her hand in marriage, he found her beautiful and could not believe his luck. He did not ask for a dowry and her father could not afford one, either. Abaaz had brought along only an uncle to testify for him. He claimed to not have any parents. Amina's father was skeptical, but boys were hard to get and that too without a dowry. But, what sold her father finally, was Amina's insistence that she loved him. Her father agreed eventually and they married.

Sometime, they had engraved their initials on the bark of the tree behind the Darzi shop to mark the spot where it began, but now the bark has covered the engraving. What had gone wrong? Mary perversely looks down the gully, imagining the bark every time she walks past it on the way to the church, a key to a happy moment that preceded many years of unhappy ones.

Unhappy because Abaaz had died. She bore a child for him and while still unborn, Abaaz had died. He died, or he ran away no one knows. There was no body. He regularly went to Hassanpur for business and it was from one of these trips that he never returned. It was assumed that he had run away. But a relative of his called. They had never heard of this relative before. He said that Abaaz had died. The relative had tried hard to find contact details of Abaaz's wife. And

when he did, it was too late, the funeral was over. There was no need for her to go. She did not cry much, nor did she try to visit his grave, she was convinced he had run away with another girl. She did come to terms with it, she accepted that he may have found true love, after all she had only impressed herself upon him. She was naive to think it was mutual.

Her father accepted her back, but didn't have the money to support her and her now born son. He asked her to remarry, but she refused. She decided to support herself; she decided to work. No woman had ever worked in another man's business, in their family, it was a taboo that had no basis, except for the fact that she was demeaning her man by implying that he couldn't earn enough to support his family. But she had no man, somewhere there was a grave with his name. Amina found a job at a travel lodge as the receptionist. She had to give up her *burkha*, though she was allowed to wear a shawl to cover her hair. Her father was disallowing it: already a widow, the last of the reserves of her honour was at stake. She gave up her *burkha* with little regret, it was long since she had stopped fearing the hard rules of religion that bounded her freedom.

The clothes store where Amina first showed her face, bare to the world has since packed its stock and moved away. Mary walks past that hallowed ground every Sunday, which is now a bakery and often, buys a piece of cake and waits for her memory sack to burst, which takes her back with such temporal resolution that every breath she took on the day she took off her *burkha*, seems more clear than those she took just that morning. Amina's first feeling was of nakedness; then was of freedom. It wasn't like the time she bared her face to Abaaz, this was different, she was not sneaking an exposure, she was liberating herself. She soon got naturalized to the feeling of having the dusty breeze beat her face, evaporate her sweat and cool her down. She had forgotten how it felt to be a little girl, how it was to breathe air directly without a barrier, it was so much easier and lighter. The euphoria lasted a long time, it lasted even as she went home and her father looked the other way and her mother cried.

The hotel in which she worked is at the point on the road where it takes a swift turn to right

when one considers the route to the church. The hotel is a small, thirty room lodge with no surrounding wall or gate. From the portico of the hotel she can see the bakery. Mary often thinks how fitting it is to imagine the road as a timeline of her life. The lodge demarcates the turning point and from there, when she looks back, all that she can remember clearly is her liberation from the burkha. Before that everything seems like another life, hidden from view. Though the road is one, the turn segments it into its second chapter.

She wore a *sari* to work, a traditional Hindu dress. Her rejection of the burkha caused an uproar among her parent's community. The community called her a whore, but she paid no heed and told her parents to not also. Her parents could do nothing but wash their hands off. They did not openly disown her nor did they fight for her honour, they claimed their age had taught them that somethings were not worth fighting for, and even if they did want to fight they just didn't have the strength. At the mosque, orthodox men and their wives let their displeasure show openly. She was hounded by rude and sly comments and open dismissals from the mosque. She tried justifying, but it was hard to find ears that wanted to listen. What they saw with their eyes was enough for them, there were no words she could find that would make them understand differently. A strong-tongued woman suggested that she ruined her own life; she had lost the chance to remarry, she had disgraced it herself by exposure; there was no difference between her and a whore; she may as well have resorted to whoring. They succeeded, she stopped going for *namaaz*. Her son was isolated at the madrasa too. Parents educated their wards at the *madrasa* that talking to and mingling with children of widows who shunned their religion was an act that would bring the rage of God upon them. She pulled her son out of the madrasa. She feared her son would become self hating and would resent his own birth and lineage. She sent him to the government school with children of other ethnicities. The condition of the school was deplorable, but the only other two options were a convent or a pro-Hindu school, in which she knew, her son chanced being isolated again. Her son settled down eventually in the new school, but she knew that she was bringing him up without an identity and

without a religion to follow. She shouldn't have cared too much, because she was shunning her own religious duties herself, but, she realized she still wanted a God.

She stayed in a bedroom of her own at her parent's home. Her job as a receptionist was multi-fold, she alone handled the arrival and departure of guests, organized the rooms, the room cleaning, handled the accounts and billing and grievances of the customers. The owner had grown too old to do it himself and he gave her the job because he always believed a woman behind the counter gave a pleasant countenance to his hotel and she got the job because other women were either not literate enough or were not interested in working. Her job absorbed her time and she loved it. This stretch of the road between the lodge and her son's school is the happiest. It always rescues Mary from the forlorn guilt, melancholy and loneliness that plagued her as she went to church on Sundays. She always wants to stop for a moment and reflect about it, but the highway traffic that bottlenecks at that point because of the turning, hinders her ability to do so in peace. She has to move on, and she does until she reaches the point where the road dips again.

Amina wanted a God that would be welcoming and not hamper her ability to earn a living the way she was. She knew Allah was a good God, but she found it difficult to access him because his people actively rejected her. Amina's life revolved around her work and her son and the latter was the escape from the former, she had no friends and almost never any visitors. Pangs of loneliness sometimes attacked her. Often, when she was not working she would read her sons' textbooks for the lack of any other useful work to do. Thus she landed upon Christianity. It shocked her that Islam and Christianity were more brother religions than anything. They seemed to have many threads of commonality running through both their histories. She developed a personal interest in the religion, but never dreamed of converting completely, until one day a bible ended up in the 'lost and found' section of her lodge. A man, probably an angel of god, she joked to herself, left it behind for her to find it. She claimed it and kept it at her desk, reading a few pages at a time whenever she got a chance. Her aim was to find out how much of its history was common with that of the faith she was

born into. They both had Ibrahims, Adams and Gabrials, they both had a main prophet. One discovery led to another, until she decided she would go to a church; specifically, the church next to the mosque.

She felt awkward and adulterated as she stood in the corners and observed. The holy Eucharist was on and though there were some marked differences between the christian Eucharist and *Namaaz*, she felt she was identifying with it easily. She had found a new God whom she could trust. No, this God wasn't better than Allah, or worse, but starting afresh, with a new God, with no expectations, and no obligations from her part to its followers, she was free to experiment and be selfish with Him. She attended mass on Sundays, but arrived late and left early, during the communion, so that she would not be coerced into mixing with the congregation. After most of the crowd had left she'd return and sit in the front pews, read out loud from the bible and talk directly to the God in front of her, a statue of Him, made in the likeness of man, a new exciting concept. To her it depicted God had a chance to be as flawed as us all, yet He was not; if we tried enough we could aim to Him, Himself. Her experimental religious plodding satiated her and she could not ask for more. She tried her best to fit in and not be fingered out as a outsider. Of course, no one in her past knew about her new venture. She hid her bible in a shoe box under her bed, unfortunate and disrespectful she knew, but there was luster in the surreptitiousness of it all. She felt more intimate with God; unshared, private, personal, and pure, that, when a nun approached her one day and asked her name and whether she were catholic, Amina, cut herself short while replying and just smiled. The nun's question should have intimidated her, threatened her with a chance of exposure, but Amina wasn't afraid, she had quit being afraid, this was a God that would protect her, from even His own people. God had spoken for her, Amina was to remain quiet, the nun understood and walked away.

But God didn't warn her about Shaitan, Satan. She should have known, that it was only sooner or later before which he would wield his wicked hand to counter God's grace. He sent two

brothers, pair of militant radicals, from the mosque, on a bike, to take away all that God had given her, to test her faith in him. It was another day that Mary remembers every detail of, like the day she shed her burkha because that was the day she was put back into one. The road reaches its lowest point here.

It was long since Mary had stopped crying, everytime she reached that point. It was longer since those two had thrown the vial of acid, burning the skin on her face and neck and forever pinching her skin into undulating peaks and troughs, unnatural and alien-like, and burning away her lips. The brothers had stalked her. They aimed to show that those who had shunned God and his ways would be shunned back by him back. But the brothers' names were never told, she could not remember who had done it to her, she was in shock. It was only later when she read their obituary in the newspaper, death by motor accident, did it all come back to her. He had silenced her and dealt directly Himself with the Devil's henchmen, lest she succumb to Shaitan, and be obsessed with justice, not faith.

But, the brothers had received God's mercy. They were killed swiftly before they had the chance to feel the unending suffering, pain and suicidal hopelessness, that she did. The pain never stopped nor did her freedom ever come back. In the beginning when the bandage came off, she wore her scar proudly, at least she tried to, but it was hard to find acceptance. The hotel owner informed her that because of the attack he would be unloading some of her work on another man he had employed, namely the front desk duties. She still had the job, the owner, though an altruistic man made sure no customer would see her. She was happy with the arrangement; it's true that you could see her teeth, even when she is not smiling. Her lips were eaten away by the acid; she found it difficult to close her mouth now. Ironically, by burning away her skin, the acid had once again veiled her. Everywhere she went, it drew sympathy; it became her identity and no one spoke to her the same way again. At first she thought the discomfort in the voice of everyone who spoke to her was because they couldn't bear to see her in pain, but it wasn't long before it became clear that they

were finding it difficult to be around a woman who was rejected by providence itself. Whispers, in plenty about town, spoke about how she had brought this down upon herself; the brothers were only the tools of the almighty. People chose to ignore the brother's eventual fate- marginalization in life, led to ignorance in death.

The burning sensation in her skin remained for six months, but the boring down of the townsmen's eyes hurt more. Reluctant, though she was she had no other choice but to adorn the burkha once again.

And she wore it and hid behind it and retreated further into herself. So much so, that she became a ghost. A walking shell of herself in six weeks time. Her pupils were always dilated and her voice had grown scarce. The effect of the acid didn't stop, it had slowly leaked inside her and was turning her into ashes. Her trips to the church had stopped and she left her job. Her faith in God had been shaken, if not rendered nonexistent. Days went by as she sat listlessly on her bed, staring at the melancholic spinning fan. Her parents were too old now. Distraught, though they were, they had no energy to do anything about it. Her son tried to talk her out of it, but he was rather unimaginative and lost interest in her case, he abandoned her to her own devices, though he sat next to her often saying nothing, doing nothing. The townspeople took her withdrawal as an answer to her long pending repentance for her sins, they showed her no mercy or sorrow.

But the road started its ascent again from the point. Amina's final spark had not yet extinguished completely. The spark grew into a flame and resisted the shadows that threatened to silence her. She found the strength to open the bible again. She had put her hand under her bed, and pulled out the now dusty shoebox. Why had God forsaken her? She read to find out. She read it, a page at a time, she read about the destruction of Job; the sacrifices of Abraham; the passion of the Lord and one day she finished it. When she did, she laid it on the table, took out her old burkha, put it on, walked out of the house, and went to the church, but not before she inscribed, carefully and calmly, as if she were carving the words, on the front page of the bible, "My name is Mary, and I

have no repentance or regret, I simply follow the Lord and his word.”

She got her job back and started reclaiming her life. Her son had grown old enough to have a job and he had one. Her parents, disillusioned by the spectre that she had become, were more than overjoyed by her return from the abyss, wherever it was. They accepted her change of faith; sometimes the self was more important than a set of beliefs. She also stopped wearing the burkha for the second time, but soon returned to it, she may have changed her self and changed her family, but changing the whole village was not so easy, she learned to accept that. She also believed in God again.

Every evening Mary visits the church, like she did that day she was born again. Every evening like the stations of the cross, she starts her pilgrimage across town, from her house on the east till the church in the North-West of her town, which is located on a highway; a highway that is also the lifeline of her small town, but which uncannily resembles the time-line of her undulating life. Every evening she walks past the stained stone, under the palm fronds, she lets that bubble burst in her head. The bubble storing her childhood innocence, precious and limited, a misnomer of her life to come. The innocence led to her naivety, and her naivety led to her unfortunate marriage, marked by the slowly disappearing scar on the tree behind the tailor's shop down the small road off of the main road. She looks at the hotel where she worked, the shop where she was freed. She stands there and soaks in the exuberance that this place resembles in her life's time line. She moves on to the point that marks her experimentation with God. Her time of growth which was abruptly taken away again. As the road goes to the lowest point she remembers how she sank to her lowest, until she rose again from the fossa and finally found the Church.

Inside the church, she removes her veil, and faces the statue of the Son. She still does not attend the Eucharist. It does not strike her as unnatural to have a jibba in a place of Christian worship. People approach her, but she does not answer or answers minimally. They see her face, her scar, and seem to understand. She does not speak, but only reflects, she reflects on the word of God,

on the book that had brought her out of her silence. But finally, she kneels down and looks squarely in the eyes of the statue of the lord and says, "Forgive them Father, for the world has sinned..." she does not wipe the tear from her face; she does not take communion, she is not allowed to, but this is the time when she feels the Ghost enter her. "Forgive them Father, for the world has sinned, forgive them because they know not what they do."