

Clear Your Doubts About Islam

He lurks at the entrance to his neighborhood. Dinner lights shine through the windows of most houses along the street. The lights outline each well-manicured lawn. They illuminate only a sliver of his face, leaving the rest shrouded in the darkness of his car.

In his house a few doors down, his wife enters the dining room, her skirt trailing a little behind her. She dries her hands and forearms with a towel. He can see all of her through the full length windows lining the room. Her eyes gaze outward. They are glassy and enigmatic.

His eyes wander to the other houses and their dining room windows. Some families are already sitting down for dinner. None of the women look like his wife. None of them are as beautiful as her, or as dark. It's impossible to miss the sight of her on this street. He wonders quietly to himself how many husbands have looked to that window and fantasized about her.

He taps the steering wheel with his thumb at a slow, hypnotic pace.

A neighbor leaves his house. He watches his neighbor carry a bulging black bag to the side of the house. He remains rigid throughout the clatter of the lid opening and slamming. His neighbor, lost in his own thoughts, never looks in his direction.

He flicks on the dome light and checks his face in the rearview mirror. Nothing besides stubble on his chin. Only his shirt betrays him--a tiny spot of makeup that smears when he tries to rub it out. The spot morphs into a peach-colored splotch that looks exactly like what it is. She'll notice. She cleans his clothing, and even if she didn't, she would notice. He rubs until he realizes he doesn't really care.

She is used to him coming home this late. His shirt and cuffs are already unbuttoned when he walks in the door; his tie is bunched up in his hand.

"How was work?" she asks.

"Long," he says. "We got a few new contracts from Japan."

"That's good, no?"

He shrugs. "It means I'll be coming home later."

He turns and heads to the bedroom, pulling off his shirt along the way. He takes off his shirt and drapes it over the chair to the desk in his study, makeup side hidden from the doorway.

Lentils and basmati rice sit ready to eat on the stove. He leans forward and smells the food. A low murmur of satisfaction escapes him.

He reaches for the electric kettle beside the stove.

"It's already ready," she says, reaching for his tea and handing it to him.

He is surprised, even though he shouldn't be--she still does this for him.

Allahu akbar rings throughout the house. Both of them reach for their phones to silence the electronic Adhan. She sets her mug on the table and smooths out the sleeves of her shirt. He blows on his tea and sips it without any semblance of rising.

She stops. "Are you going to pray?"

He looks at her. A second passes. Two seconds. They've had this conversation before.

They part ways--she to the living room, and he to the bathroom.

"*Bismillah*," he mumbles.

Pools of water fall into his cupped hands and overflow and wash down the drain. Once the water is warm, he shoves a handful into his mouth. Then he douses his face three times. Then he washes his arms up to his elbows. Then over his hair. Then around and inside his ears. He removes his socks and curls his bare toes against the tiled floor as he stares at the running water. He shuts off the faucet and replaces his socks without getting his feet wet.

Both of their rugs are already out and facing the same way in the living room.

"*Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*," he says.

His words are little more than a mumble, just barely loud enough for his wife to hear. They proceed through the same pattern as always--bowing, rising, prostrating, kneeling, rising, bowing. A cycle repeated four times.

He gets up immediately afterwards, while she stays behind to continue. His rug finds its way into the basket of rugs in the living room on his way back to the kitchen.

She finishes her prayers and goes to his study, where she walks up to his shirt, still draped over the chair, and inspects it. The makeup stain catches her eye, but her

face never changes. Instead, her finger finds the stain and brushes it. Her finger rubs faster and harder, only to spread the stain further throughout the shirt, deeper into the fabric.

She finds him in the kitchen drinking his tea while reading the news on his phone.

"I made du'a for you," she says.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because I know you're struggling."

His eyes remain fixated on his phone. Except his finger stops moving, and the screen eventually fades to black and his own reflection stares back at him.

"The food will get cold," she says.

He waits for her to bring the food to the table. There is more than enough food. There is enough for a whole family.

The sounds of forks and spoons fill the void of conversation. She reaches for a bowl after he spoons a rice onto his plate. Back and forth. One spoonful into his mouth, followed by a spoonful into hers. They continue like this until their plates are empty and she takes the food away to be divided and packaged for the rest of the week.

"Would you like me to clean your shirt?" she asks.

"I can take care of it," he says.

"You never wash your own clothing," she says.

"Well, you never ask if I would like you to clean my clothing," he says.

They don't exchange another word until he opens his mouth again.

"I regret converting."

She meets his eyes without a word.

"I'll never get used to this. It's always felt like...an inconvenience," he continues. She finishes covering the bowls with plastic wrap as he speaks.

"I can't handle the way you cover up every single time we go out, or how I can never kiss you in public. I understand why, but I don't care, and I don't like it. And then there's all those little Arabic words I'm supposed to say, and everyone at the mosque looks at me like I'm some kind of savior, like they're expecting me to take Islam mainstream all by myself."

He waits for her to speak. She has trouble finding the words, making them form in her mouth.

"I don't want a divorce," she finally says. "We could live separately if that is something you want."

"That's the thing," he says, "I don't want a divorce either, not after everything I went through with you and your family."

"Then why can't you just try a little harder?" Her voice almost catches when she says this.

"I did try. I tried for years." His voice crescendos with each syllable.

"You won't let us try counseling or even talk to the Imam--"

"I'm sick of you bringing that up, as if talking is going to change my beliefs."

"We could live separately, if that is something you want."

Silence rushes into the sudden void of their conversation. He looks back down at his phone to avoid the look in her eyes.

"Would it be so bad to live with me?" she asks.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices that the lid of the kitchen trash can bulges out just slightly.

"I have to take out the trash," he mumbles.

She watches him yank the bag out of the can and carry it through the kitchen and to the garage.

He lets the darkness settle over him for a moment before turning on the light. He carries the bag through the garage and to the row of trash cans along the side of the house.

On the way back through the garage, he stops in front of the car. The slight jingle of his keys with each step reminds him that they're still there. His shoes are inside, but his slippers will do just fine.

House lights dim and then go out as time passes in the neighborhood.

It's late when he returns. His car sits parked in the same position as before. This time, there is no light to make the darkness retreat from his face. Most of the houses are dark. The light in his dining room is on, even though the room is empty. Without his wife in there, it blends in with the other houses on the street.

He finds her in the living room, reading a book. She offers him a cursory glance. Her eyes return to him when he doesn't look away. She tilts her head at his change of demeanor. He walks over to the couch and sits down next to her. His eyes move from the words on the page to her.

"I still love you," he says.

She looks at him. "I love you too."

He reaches forward, wrapping his arm around her as if she is a newfound acquaintance. She leans into his embrace. They sit this way for a moment, remembering. She closes her book and sets it down and allows him to wrap his arms all the way around her.

"We should go to bed," he says.

"Yes, we should."

They rise and walk together to the hallway. She stops at the bedroom door.

"Are you coming in with me?" she asks.

"No. Not yet."

She nods. "Okay. Goodnight."

"Night."