

After the Masjid

They biked against the chilly summer breeze along the road, choosing the cracks and potholes in the asphalt over the smooth concrete sidewalk beside them. Not that there was much traffic today. It was a Friday afternoon, and everyone was either at work or home or lunch, not heading to the mosque at the edge of town.

"You have to tell me what I should expect when I go inside," said Alex.

"The first thing you should know," replied Amir, "is that it's called a *masjid*."

"Is that what mosque means in Arabic?"

"Yessir," Amir said, "and that's what you say if you want people to know you're a real Muslim."

"What else?"

"When you see a Muslim, one of you is supposed to say *Assalamu alaikum*, and that basically means 'may God bless you and protect you and grant you lots of hot virgins.' And then the other person says *Walaikum assalam*, which basically means 'I hope you also get lots of hot virgins.'"

"What does it really mean?"

"It's like saying peace be with you."

The mosque stood apart from the surrounding cornfields and townhouses, its exterior a mixture of goldenrod and saffron. A single ornamental minaret rose above the building, casting a shadow on the copper colored dome in front of it. It would have been even more striking if it wasn't for the grey storm clouds obscuring most of the sunlight.

Cars passed them and turned at the entrance to the mosque. The women that got out wore dark headscarves and billowing clothing that covered every inch of their

skin. Some of the men wore rounded hats and long white robes. Alex looked to his Amir, who wasn't wearing any of this, and said nothing. His eyes wandered to his own pale hands resting on his handlebars, and he wondered how much he would stick out.

The lobby's polished white marble floor and wall mosaics patterned in a variety of abstract figures was as immaculate as the exterior of the building. Alex lost himself in the distractions, forgetting both the greeting and the response he was supposed to give. Light streamed through giant glass skylights onto the gathering Muslims, onto Amir as he greeted the other members of the mosque. Alex didn't recognize a single person there.

Alex scanned the room until he spotted everyone congregating in another part of the lobby, an area set off from the main lobby. One of them caught his gaze and he looked away.

"*Assalimakjadfm*" a Muslim said to him on the way to the carpeted prayer room. Alex smiled and nodded back.

Amir walked back over to him, grinning and nodding to other Muslims on the way. "I have to make *wudu*," he said. "It's basically where you throw water all over yourself and then you're pure enough to pray."

A man's voice rang out from inside the prayer hall, directing the people to begin flowing into the room. The voice reminded him of a hymn, the way the words rose and fell with each syllable, a melodious chant. The lobby continued to empty, and before long the majority of the Muslims stood inside, barefoot and praying on the jade green carpet.

"That's the *Adhan*," said Amir.

Alex nodded, trying not to make eye contact with anyone.

"When you hear the guy shouting Arabic really loudly, you have to line up shoulder to shoulder with all the other Muslim men."

"And the women are in the back?"

"That's how it's done."

They made a detour to a set of shoe racks.

"Take off your shoes, or else they'll bat you with their clubs," ordered Amir.

Alex knelt down to unlace his shoes, regretting immediately his decision to wear shoes that required so much lacing. Amir kicked off his own slip-ons and waited for his friend to finish. Alex gave up yanked off his shoes and stood to face Amir, who followed his gaze into the room, where an older man in white robes stood before his congregation.

"There's a short sermon before the prayer," said Amir. "Just take a seat and follow what everyone else is doing."

"What about the people praying right now?"

"Don't worry about them."

They took a seat near the middle, where Amir acted as a buffer on his left side.

The older man at the front of the room read from a book on the stand in front of him, his voice emitting a long string of syllables and sounds that sounded nothing like English. The congregation listened attentively to this man, some of them responding in Arabic. Alex wondered if this man was the same as a priest or a rabbi, or if he was something else entirely. All this talk of Muslims in the news, and here he was, in the middle of one of their services, and it was nothing extraordinary.

At some point Alex realized the man in the front had switched to speaking English. Alex tried to understand what the man was saying, looking to Amir for reassurance, but Amir's eyes were fixated on the carpet in front of him. The man talked about the importance of remaining a community through hard times, and the dangers of members following their own selfish goals instead of working for the good of the community. It was all strangely reminiscent of his Catholic upbringing.

A moment of deafening silence.

He waited for some kind of direction. More Arabic floated through the air, and the people rose to their feet.

The man at the front spoke, "Allahu akbar," and raised both his hands. Everyone else did the same, and Alex followed along. He listened to the man at the front reciting in Arabic. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched when Amir bowed down to touch his knees, and he did the same. Alex's movements lagged by half of a second, and he wondered all throughout the prayer if the others could tell that he did not belong. The feeling of being out of place intensified when he touched his forehead to the soft carpet, mimicking those who understood and believed in what they were doing. The discomfort didn't subside until he watched others slide their hands up from their faces and stand up. He waited for Amir to do the same, and then he followed the gesture.

"Do you think we're all savages?" Amir asked back in the safety of the lobby.

"No," said Alex. "I thought it was interesting."

"That's your answer for everything."

Alex smiled and shrugged..

"Well thanks for coming. I bet a lot of that made you uncomfortable."

"It wasn't that bad. You've gotten me to do crazier things."

This time it was Amir's turn to smile.

They walked outside to get their bikes. The dark clouds from earlier were almost directly above them now, threatening to unload their contents at any minute. Both boys ignored the warning as they unlocked their bikes and peddled away from the mosque.

"Do you want me to use my Muslim Scholar voice?" asked Amir.

"Sure."

Amir cleared his throat. He picked up an imaginary pad of paper from an invisible table, and an imaginary pen from his invisible shirt pocket, as if he was at the front of the mosque instead of balancing on his bike.

"*Bismillah hir-Rahma nir-Raheem*," he began. Then he whispered through a cupped hand on the side of his mouth, "That means, 'in the name of Allah, the most Kind and the most merciful,' for those of you heathens who haven't yet found the way."

"Brothers and sisters," he continued, "Today I must talk to you about one of the many crises facing our world today--that is, of course, the lack of obedience of children to their parents. We live in a time when Shaytan plays his tricks on us everywhere we go. You cannot find a single place to eat in public without seeing a woman's bare skin, naked for the world to see! This is a time when families should at their closest, but we are living in a time when they are at their furthest apart."

"I don't think that's the right way to say--"

"Shut the fuck up, brother Alex," Amir interrupted.

"Anyway, The Prophet--peace be upon him--told us that we should spend more time praying and doing religious things than anything else. How dare we try to take out

loans to buy a car, or speak to other women, when we should be praying at the *masjid* as a family! Brothers and sisters, we must drop everything we are doing and go straight away to the *masjid* to pray."

Alex waited until he was sure his friend was finished before speaking. "You have a bright future ahead of you as a Muslim priest."

Amir burst out laughing. "An Imam."

They would have stayed outside were it not for the sudden downpour from above. They felt the first few drops, but made no effort to pedal faster even as the quickening pace of the rain drenched them from head to toe.

They raced each other through the rain. Amir steered directly into puddles that had already formed in the cracks and fissures along the side of the road, while Alex was content to simply let the water soak through his clothing.

Sounds of thunder joined the patter of rain. The boys didn't change their pace. A flash of lightning soon followed. Still, they did not change their pace.

Lightning crackled from above, sizzling the air around them, making it difficult to see clearly. Alex thought he saw a fleck of lightning hit a tree less than a hundred yards away, but he ignored it and passed his friend on the way to the single story ranch house with blue shutters.

The race nevertheless ended in a tie, both boys standing in the foyer, chests heaving.

Both of them stood in the foyer and removed their shoes and socks, dripping water all over the wood-paneled floor.

"I'll get a couple of towels," Alex said.

"Who cares?" said Amir. "Your parents aren't around to scold you for dripping water over the floor."

"I care if it's easy enough to avoid."

Alex hurried to the laundry room to fetch a pair of towels. When he returned to the foyer, Amir was gone. In his place lay his shorts and shirt in a crumpled wet mass. Alex turned and headed back further inside the house. He followed the trail of water on the floor to his room, where Amir sat in nothing but his underwear, curled in a ball to trap whatever heat remained on his body.

"You're getting my carpet wet," said Alex, offering a towel to his friend.

Amir stood up to grab the towel. "I was conserving heat. Didn't you see my impression of a human fetus?"

Alex grinned and went to his dresser. "Do you prefer Irish mustaches or silk scorpions?"

"Scorpions," said Amir, "because I'm more closely related to them than to the Irish."

"You're related to scorpions?"

"My people are from the desert, Alex."

"What about your dad's side?"

"He doesn't matter."

Alex tossed his friend the scorpion boxers. They turned away from each other and changed.

"Don't take anything from the floor," said Alex, "That's where all my dirty clothing is."

He gestured for Amir to join him at his dresser and opened another drawer. Inside were a half dozen neatly folded t-shirts. Amir offered his friend an exaggerated eye roll.

They threw their wet clothing into the dryer and wandered into the living room, wearing gym shorts over their boxers.

"We've got forty-five minutes to kill," said Alex.

"Let's watch a movie," said Amir. "Something sappy, like *The Titanic*."

"We're not watching *The Titanic*."

"*Requiem for a Dream* then."

"*Requiem for a Dream*? How did you make that jump?"

"Why do they sterilize lethal injections?"

Alex crouched down next to his vast collection of cheap, bootleg VHS tapes. His hand ran down the list of titles, pausing at *The Titanic* before moving on to Amir's choice. He flipped the lid of the tape and gave it a clean breath of air. Dust particles flew out into the room. He popped the movie into his almost defunct VHS player and turned back to the couch, where Amir was already comfortably situated in a teddy bear patterned blanket--Alex's blanket.

"I'm going to need that blanket," said Alex.

"There's a nice rug on the floor," replied Amir.

"I'll suffocate you with that rug before I give you both the couch and the blanket,"

Alex said, making his way to Amir.

Amir, sensing a real threat, curled into a ball just as Alex's onslaught began. Alex jumped on his friend, tearing at the edges of the fabric, attempting to pull it away. Amir

pulled the blanket over his head for protection and Alex ripped the fabric away and that was when Amir leaned forward and kissed him.

The only sound in the house was the rain beating down upon the roof and against the walls. Both boys sat frozen on the couch. Alex made an attempt to meet Amir's wounded gaze. Amir reached forward and touched his friend's shoulder. Alex shifted his eyes to examine the new hand on his shoulder without moving.

"We never talked about girls or sex or anything like that," said Amir. "I was never sure."

Alex reached over and gently removed Amir's hand from his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said.

Then the opening sequence of *Requiem for a Dream* flashed across the scene. They watched, fixated by the images of two friends carrying a television from an apartment.

The cut to black allowed Amir to come to his senses, and he scrambled to his feet. Alex made no attempt to stop him as he rushed across the room to the foyer.

"Amir," Alex as his friend put on his soaked shoes and socks. The only sound he heard was the closing of the back door and the click of the lock, despite the combined noise of the rain and the movie.

After a while, Alex went to the window overlooking his front yard. He searched for a glimpse of his friend riding his bike away through the rain, but Amir was already long gone.