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## Lost and Found

Ambata K. Kazi-Nance  
*University of New Orleans, akazi@uno.edu*

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Lost and Found

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Ambata Kazi-Nance

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004  
M.A. University of New Orleans, 2012

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## Acknowledgments

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## Abstract

*Lost and Found* is a collection of short stories that explore Black American and Black African Muslim identity in the U.S. and the African continent, and the struggles to find or maintain faith through experiences of loss (physical, emotional, and spiritual) and trauma. These stories attempt to interrogate ideas of faith, religious practice, gender roles and expectations, and the dynamics of family and community.

Keywords: Muslim, Black, identity, faith, Islam, grief, healing, loss, family, community

## Good Neighbors

I met Ms. Jean on my first morning back in New Orleans after the storm. I sat on the steps of the porch with a cup of tea, looking up at the tree in the front yard. It was the first thing I'd noticed when my husband Zaid and I drove through the city after he picked me up from the bus station the day before—the trees. There seemed to be fewer of them, or they had shrunk somehow, giving less shade.

“That’s a sycamore tree,” a voice said behind me.

An elderly white woman in a pink flowered housedress peered at me through the screen door. I stood up when she walked towards me. She didn’t smile but didn’t look unfriendly either. She had a cloud of gray frizzy hair streaked with white; her skin was mottled with age spots. Her eyes were bright, though, behind the gold wire frames she wore. She wasn’t feeble either. She stood tall, her shoulders wide and straight.

She pointed her chin towards the tree. “That’s why I chose this apartment. It’s the only one on Sycamore Street with a sycamore in front.”

She turned to me and studied my face, her eyes tracing the frame of the blue scarf wrapped loosely around my head. I held my breath while she examined me.

“Are you an Arab?”

I pressed my lips together in a weak smile. “No ma’am. I’m black. Creole.”

“A black Creole Muslim.” She said the words one by one like she was trying a food she had never tasted before, then shrugged. “Well, I’ve lived long enough to where nothing surprises me anymore.” She eyed my scarf again. “That’s a lovely shade of blue. Cerulean.”

“Zaid told me you’re an artist.”

“Yes, I’m a painter. Retired, mostly.”

She stared at me like she was waiting for me to say something.

“Well, I’m going back inside now to fix some breakfast,” I said. “It was nice meeting you.”

She turned back to her porch and sat down on an old wooden rocking chair with a well-worn orange seat cushion.

“Okay miss. My name is Jean. I think we’ll be good neighbors.”

“Yes, I hope so. I’m Samia, by the way.”

She rested her elbows on the arms of the chair and folded her hands. She bowed her head in response.

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I didn’t know what to make of Ms. Jean or her “good neighbor” comment. She made me uncomfortable with the way she looked at me, like she was adding up my features to see if

they made the correct sum. If my older sister Khadijah was here, she'd have shrugged and said, "White people," in an exasperated way that made me laugh, but I'd left her back in Houston.

It was early June, less than a year since Hurricane Katrina, and I was the first in my family to return to the city. I didn't want to go back, didn't know what I'd be going back to, but towards the end of March, Zaid got a call from his boss at Tulane University offering him his office assistant job back. He gave the requisite 'I have to talk with my wife first' response, but I already knew what the answer was going to be. He'd been working at a clothing store at a mall in Houston, and although he didn't say it, I knew he was waiting to be called back home. I couldn't disagree with him. It was a lower-level position, but I was three months pregnant and we needed health insurance.

Zaid left in April and stayed in his aunt's water-damaged house without electricity in a mostly abandoned neighborhood, sweating through the night and taking cold showers in the morning until he could save up enough money to find a decent apartment for us. When he found the place on Sycamore, a one bedroom in a double shotgun, he sounded so excited, such a welcome change from the shakiness I'd heard over the line the last two months, I tried my best to match his enthusiasm. I told him to sign the lease and I'd order my bus ticket home.

I had no idea what I was going to do in New Orleans. The school where I'd taught eighth grade English wasn't ready to reopen in the fall, and with the baby coming it was hard to imagine going back to work anyway. Ms. Jean's weird welcome only reminded me of how alone I was in the city, with Zaid working all day at Tulane plus a second job at night bussing tables at a restaurant downtown, and our families and friends scattered around the country.



But I was determined to make the best of things and with everything so out of order, maybe Ms. Jean could at least be somebody to talk to. Khadijah would have reminded me that first impressions aren't everything, and sometimes you have to take what you get. She had a saying for every occasion.

\*\*\*

Ms. Jean must have been as lonely as I was, if not more. I don't know if she sat by her front door waiting, but as soon as I stepped onto the porch, she'd be at her screen door, watching me.

“Hello, good neighbor.” She greeted me the same way every time. Her voice was clipped. She didn't smile much and never called me by my name. She didn't do small talk either. Nothing about the weather or other mundane things. She talked about herself a lot though. She told me she used to teach art at several schools in the city. That she was brought up in Lafayette but married her high school sweetheart, Rodney, after she graduated, and moved to New Orleans with him.

She said she used to take a streetcar down to the French Quarter and wander the streets while Rodney was in law school at Loyola. She won me over with her wistful stories of how her experience in the city inspired her to start painting seriously, a hobby from

childhood that became a passion. It was Rodney who encouraged her to enroll in art classes. He died ten years ago, and after a brief stay with her sister in Lafayette to get back on her feet, she came back to New Orleans by herself and rented the apartment on Sycamore.

One afternoon she started talking about the storm. “I thought I’d be okay until the water reached the top step here,” she said, tapping it with the toes of her right foot. “Then I knew I had to go. Mr. Anderson, the gentleman who lives three blocks down, came calling me from his canoe. I grabbed my bag and left. I figured if my work was meant to survive, it would. Went to stay with my sister. Came back months later and found out the water never went above that top step.”

Her story was so different from my own. Zaid and I had lived in the Lower Ninth Ward, the forgotten part of the city, in a house he inherited from his grandmother. We’d spent the last three years slowly fixing it up. I haven’t seen it since I came back, but Zaid did a few months after the storm. He said he cried when he saw it. Said it looked like someone took a hammer to the right side of the house, where the bedrooms were, and smashed it to pieces.

He’d walked on rotting boards through what was left of the house, hoping he might find a photo album or something to salvage, but there was nothing. The sofa had flipped completely over on top of a desk. The bookcases had slid across the living room, crashing in to each other. Books were everywhere, black with mold and bloated from water. The dining table had been pushed all the way to the wall, then up the ceiling, like somebody had tried to make a slide out of it. The kitchen looked mostly the same though, he said, with the dishes stacked neatly in the cabinets and the refrigerator standing quietly, absent of its hum. Even

the ironing board still stood in its corner by the side door, the iron perched on top with its cord dangling to the floor, just as we had left it.

I wanted to tell Ms. Jean she was lucky, but then again maybe she wasn't any luckier than I was. She'd lost other things, bigger things than I could imagine.

"Are you going back to work after the baby?" she asked one steamy evening towards the end of June. She was on her porch and I sat on the steps. It was the first time she had mentioned my growing belly. I told her I wanted to stay home with the baby for a while, but we needed more money.

She nodded. The darkening sky made me bold. "Do you have any children?" I asked.

"One. I had a daughter, Nancy, but she died almost two decades ago."

I couldn't see her face in the dusk, but her voice strained.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I couldn't have gone through it without my Rodney," she said. "He saved me, just like my daddy before him."

She told me since early childhood she'd been plagued by anxiety. The smallest tragedies, like her little brother's broken arm, sent her into inconsolable fits. Her father would find her behind the house, crying and rocking herself in her arms. At school, if a teacher reprimanded her for daydreaming, something she did often, she'd hide her face in her books and cry. Her father finally sat her down and told her she was stronger than her fears, that she had to be. Rodney had helped her in the same way, reminding her of what her daddy told her. It was harder after losing Rodney though. She called that her "dark period," and didn't elaborate.

“My sister tried to help me, God bless her,” she said, with a shake of her head, “but living with her was like being stuck in a hot closet. I couldn’t breathe for the way she tried to coddle me.”

She spoke again, her voice a little more upbeat. “I have a grandson, though. Hank. I got a letter from him last week. He’s in Baton Rouge. Says he’s going to visit soon. Says he has a surprise for me.”

“That sounds nice,” I said.

“Let’s hope so,” she said with a huff of laughter. “I haven’t seen much or heard from him in a long while.”

\*\*\*

Late the next morning I was sitting on the sofa thumbing through a book about what to expect after I had the baby when I heard a knock at the door.

“Hello, good neighbor.”

“Hey, Ms. Jean. Do you want to come in?”

“No, but I want to see something.” She stepped just inside the door and scanned my living room. “Yes, I thought so. I figured your apartment had a mantel like mine. You need some artwork in here. I’d like to give you a painting.”

\*\*\*

I had never been in her apartment before. It was cool and dark, with wine-colored curtains covering the windows. The walls were covered in paintings. She had an old burnt orange and maroon velvet sofa that looked just like my grandma's, and a sturdy wooden coffee table with matching end tables stacked high with books.

She led me down a hall just past the closed bedroom door into a back room adjacent to the kitchen. It was just like the room in my own apartment, except where mine held a computer desk and bookcases and a brown leather loveseat, hers had baker's racks with baskets full of art supplies on the shelves, with several stacks of painted canvasses leaning along two other walls. It was the only room without curtains. Sunlight poured in through a picture window on the back wall.

Her work was surreal. Figures that looked both human and animal appeared in each, their features blurred, the colors of their skin mixed. I had flipped through several paintings, all dark shades of brown, red, and gray, when I spotted one with yellows, oranges, and blues.

"I like the colors in this one." I propped it up on the craft table. She walked over.

“Yes. I painted this one for my daddy. When I was a child he’d read to me from the Bible. Revelations was his favorite. The part about the angel having one foot in the earth and the other in the sea. Do they have any stories like that in your book?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said.

Beyond the colors was a figure with a face like a bull without horns, head angled like it was preparing to charge, one muscular leg rooted to a large mass of earth, the other, more like a tentacle than a leg, dipping into a pool of blue. Just off the center to the right, a book with a maroon cover sat on what looked like a yellow cloud.

“He said the story was a metaphor for how to be in the world,” she said. “To stay firmly rooted, yet still fluid.”

“Sounds like a lesson for all of us,” I said.

She grinned at me and gestured to the painting. “Take it.”

“What? No, I couldn’t,” I said. “Your dad—”

She held up her hand. “It’s yours. It will look lovely above your mantel.”

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That night it was Monday, which meant Zaid was off from the restaurant. We ate dinner in the living room, our plates perched on tray tables. Zaid studied the painting while he chewed.

He nodded slowly. "I like it. It's weird, but I like it." He grinned at me. "You two sure are spending a lot of time together."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just trying to picture you in your hijab and that old white lady in her muumuu sipping sweet tea and fanning yourselves."

I nudged him with my shoulder. "Shut up," I said. "She's an old lady and she doesn't have anybody. I'm just trying to be nice." I looked over at the wall that joined ours and Ms. Jean's apartment and pressed my lips together.

Zaid yawned and laid his head in my lap and was soon asleep, his mouth making a little pop sound every time he exhaled.

I looked up at the painting. The figure stared down at me, its brow deeply furrowed. It wasn't true what I'd told Zaid, no matter what I wanted to believe. Strange as whatever this thing Ms. Jean and I had was, I liked her. I liked the painting, and I liked Ms. Jean.

\*\*\*

A few days after Ms. Jean gave me the painting, I woke to the sound of a terrible, hacking cough. Stepping into the hallway, I realized the sound was coming from Ms. Jean's apartment. I heard furniture being dragged across the floor. There was a loud bang, followed

by a “Fuck!” I got dressed and went outside. A beat-up green truck I’d never seen before was parked over the curb in front.

I rang the doorbell twice before the door swung open. “Yeah?” a voice rumbled. I hopped back as the screen door was kicked out and a man stepped onto the threshold. He had brown, stringy hair that hung almost to his shoulders, and bloodshot eyes the same hazel color as Ms. Jean’s. He wore old blue jeans and a tattered T-shirt with an eagle head on the front. He scowled at me.

“Can I help you?”

“I was looking for Ms. Jean. Are you her grandson?”

He tilted his chin up and squinted at me.

“I’m Samia. I live next door.” I held out my hand. He looked at it, then grabbed my fingers in a weak shake. “Is she in?” I asked.

He looked me up and down, then over his shoulder. He sniffed. “Yeah, she’s here. She’s taking a nap. I’ll tell her you stopped by.”

I opened my mouth to respond but he’d already stepped back and shut the door.

\*\*\*



Hank and a woman, the source of the rattling cough I soon learned, came in and out of the house but never spoke to me beyond a few grunts. The first time the woman saw me she looked like she had seen a ghost. Her skin was badly sunburned and her hair was bleached almost white. She wore cutoff denim shorts and a pink tank top. She looked like an old Barbie doll dug out from a pile of rubble. I was sitting on my fold-up chair reading a book when she stepped out with a pack of Marlboro's and a lighter. When she saw me, she turned around quick and went back inside.

The rusted green truck was gone one afternoon so I took a chance and rang Ms. Jean's doorbell. She was at the door before I even put my arm down.

"Hello, good neighbor."

Her voice was shaky. She looked, for the first time, old. Her shoulders drooped, her eyes were dull.

"Ms. Jean."

"You've met my grandson. And his fiancée. She's the surprise. Says he met her in Florida." There was a bite to her tone.

"That's quite a surprise," I ventured.

She grinned. A little mischief sparkled briefly in her eyes.

"How long will they be staying with you?"

"Just for a little while, he says." Here her voice dropped conspiratorially. "I think he wants—." She stopped abruptly and looked at me, her eyes suspicious. "He lost his job and just needs a little time to get back on his feet." Now she sounded like she was talking to a bill collector.

"So everything's okay?" I tried.

“Yes, of course,” she replied.

“Are you sure? Because—.”

She pursed her lips and stood taller. “I said everything was fine. I have my grandson here, and his fiancée. I have my family. Now if you will excuse me, I’d like to get some rest. Goodbye Samia.”

It was the first time she’d called me by my name. It didn’t make me feel familiar.

\*\*\*

A month went by and Hank and his fiancée were still there. The music got louder. They began to argue, cursing each other and slamming the front door as they stomped out of the house. I took to leaving the television on with the volume up to drown out the noise. One night, Zaid and I were woken by the sound of a glass bottle shattering against the wall followed by a scream.

“Shit,” Zaid muttered, grabbing his slippers out of the closet. “Stay here,” he said to me as I got out of the bed.

I ignored him and pulled a hoodie on over my T-shirt. The fabric strained against the swell of my belly. It had rained that night. The air was clean and faintly cool. I stood in the

space between our porch and Ms. Jean's while Zaid went over and knocked rapidly on the door. As soon as it opened his voice boomed out.

"Hey, man. Everything okay? A lot of noise coming through the walls," he said.

Hank stood shirtless under the porch light. He had a few poorly done tattoos on his chest and stomach. On his right shoulder, 'Nancy' was written in crooked script with a little red rose underneath. He puffed out his chest, slapping his hands together. With Zaid a good four inches taller than him and standing way too close, he still looked cowed.

He shrugged and rubbed his eyes. "It's cool, man. My girl dropped a bottle and cut her foot. She freaked out, that's all."

Zaid looked over at me. He knew Hank was lying but didn't know what to say.

"Where's Ms. Jean?" I asked.

"Sleeping," Hank said without looking at me.

I pursed my lips and shook my head at Zaid. He raised a finger at me.

"We need to see her and make sure she's okay."

Hank said nothing. Zaid stepped towards the door. Hank moved to block him but Zaid kept going. "Ms. Jean? Ms. Jean?" he called over Hank's head. He was about to push Hank out of the way when Ms. Jean appeared at the door.

"I'm right here," she said in a creaky voice.

Her hair looked like it hadn't been combed in a while. Dark circles hung under her eyes. The top button of her housedress was undone, the collar stretched to reveal a faded blue bra strap. She looked at me and I parted my lips to smile but stopped. Her eyes were cold. She looked back and forth from me to Zaid like she had never seen us before.

"What do you want?" she asked Zaid, peering up at him.

“Look, Ms. Jean, I know it’s late,” Zaid started.

“Yes,” Ms. Jean interrupted. “It’s late and you’re disturbing my family. I’ve got a mind to call the police.”

My mouth gaped open. The concern flickered out of Zaid’s face. He stood tall and stepped back. “You do that.” He looked at Hank when he said it.

Zaid turned and went back to our apartment. Ms. Jean stood at the door looking at me, her expression unchanged.

Back inside our bedroom, Zaid sat on the side of the bed. I laid down and rested my palm on his back between his shoulder blades. A multitude of emotions coursed through him right then. I had them too. But something didn’t sit well with me. Ms. Jean kept talking about her family, exalting the word like it was something regal, but it sounded as hollow as she looked. She’d talked about calling the police, but she’d wrung her hands when she said it. This family she was holding up was like a house made of paper, just waiting for the next wind to come and knock it down.

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Things continued on about the same next door, but I stopped trying to check on Ms. Jean. Instead, I started going out during the day, walking to the park or hanging out in Tulane’s library while Zaid was at work. A few times I took the bus downtown and walked around the French Quarter, imagining how the old city might have looked to Ms. Jean when she was a

young woman. I began to feel the baby moving around inside me, every ripple a rush of surprise that invigorated me.

Two weeks before the fall semester began, Zaid was offered a job as an academic advisor at the university. The raise in pay was enough that he could quit the busser job at the restaurant. He surprised me with two train tickets to Atlanta to spend a week with my parents. My sister was coming too with her family. Zaid's brother had moved to Fayetteville, a suburb outside Atlanta. I thought about Ms. Jean while I packed for the trip, but I shrugged away my concern for her. She had chosen her family, and I was choosing mine.

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We arrived back to our apartment late on a weekday evening. Ms. Jean's door was open. A light shone in the hallway. I looked in and saw straight to the back of the apartment. The whole place was bare. A man in painter's white was packing up tools.

"Where's Ms. Jean?" I asked. "Where's the woman who lives here?"

"Sorry lady," the man answered, "I don't know nothing about that."

I called the landlord the next morning.

"Ah, yes. Ms. Jean." He sighed. "She had some kind of breakdown. That's what her sister told me. Ambulance came for her late in the night. They found a hospital to admit her in Lafayette. Said she'll be there for a while."

"What about her things? Her art?" I asked.

“Her sister paid to have everything moved into storage.” His voice turned gruff. “That damn grandson of hers. Mr. Anderson down the street said he saw that guy late at night walking around the neighborhood with her paintings, selling them for fifty bucks a pop. Took off the same night they took her away.”

“Can I call her? Her sister? Which hospital is she staying at?”

“I don’t know dear. Look, I’d give you the sister’s number but they’re kinda funny people. Real snippy about their family matters. Best I pass your number on to her if I talk to her again. Okay, sweetheart?”

“Okay, I understand.”

“Painters should be wrapping up tomorrow. Got a new couple moving in next week. Young folks like yourselves. Should be good neighbors.”

I ended the call and looked up at Ms. Jean’s painting. The figure’s eyes stared down at me. The water at his feet fell in waves from light blue into deep indigo. Ms. Jean had signed her name in faint black script in the lower right corner, in the darkest blue. Jean Holmes. I realized then I’d never even known her last name. I pressed my fingertips into the corners of my eyes in a feeble attempt to dam the tears that trickled into my palms.

Good neighbors. Before Katrina, I probably wouldn’t have said more than four words to a woman like Ms. Jean. But the storm changed things, forced people together in odd ways. Watching the news in my sister’s living room, I’d seen people screaming for help in strangled voices that shredded my heart, but I’d also seen people hugging each other in shelters and on the street, old and young, white and black, so happy to be alive they didn’t see their differences. Ms. Jean had been more than a good neighbor. She had been a friend. And yet I had not been able to save her.

## Meeting Ammi

Maymuna threw the jeans and linen tunic in with the growing pile of clothes on her bed. It was the fourth outfit she'd tried on. Nothing looked right this morning. Her favorite navy blue jersey dress suddenly looked shabby, her black slacks faded and worn in at the knee. Her phone rang from somewhere deep in the pile. She dug through and pulled it out. It was Ahmed. She smiled. Just the sight of his name on the screen sent a thrill through her body.

“Salaams, are you all ready for us to come over?” he asked.

Maymuna looked down at her bare legs. “Yep.”

She shook out the jersey dress, wrapped her hair up in a tan-colored scarf, then slipped small gold hoops through her ears. Simple but elegant, she hoped.

She called Ahmed back.

“Hey, what should I call your mom?”

‘Humayra’ seemed too casual, ‘Ms. Humayra’ too Southern.

“Mrs. Yousef?” she asked.

“Actually she’s Ms. Ali. She never took my dad’s last name. But you can all her Ammi.”

“Ammi?”

“Yeah, it means mother, but we use it for mother-in-law as well.”

Maymuna shook her head. ‘Ammi’ seemed presumptuous. She and Ahmed weren’t even officially engaged yet. “No, I’ll stick with Ms. Ali.”

\*\*\*

Maymuna joined her mother in the kitchen to help prepare the brunch. A bowl of strawberries sat next to a cutting board with a sharp knife perched on top.

“Have these been rinsed?” she asked, already running the tap. Her mother, standing at the stove slowly stirring a pot of grits, nodded absently.

Maymuna wedged the knife between her thumb and the knuckle of her index finger to scoop out the top of the strawberry, the way she always did, but her hand holding the knife shook, causing the strawberry in her other hand to slip from her fingers and fall to the floor. She looked to her mother, hoping she hadn’t witnessed her clumsiness, but although her mother’s eyes were on the pot, she grinned.

“Nervous?” her mother asked.

“No,” Maymuna said, rinsing the fallen strawberry, then biting into it. She chewed. “Yes,” she admitted.

Her mother chuckled. “That’s normal.” She spoke without looking at Maymuna. Never take your eyes off a pot of cooking grits, she’d always told her daughter. “I knew your grandma Sadie since I was a baby, but the first time she came to visit after me and your dad married, I was as nervous around her as if I’d just met her. Almost burned the rice I was so worried about her tasting my cooking and thinking I wasn’t a good wife to her son.”



Maymuna's father came into the kitchen and pecked his wife on the cheek she offered instinctively. He was tall and dark like mahogany, with big, sturdy hands that could palm a basketball, but he was always gentle and playful with his wife and children.

"Aw, don't listen to her," he said, "she ain't never burned nothing a day in her life." He walked over to Maymuna and patted her on the back, then squeezed her shoulder. "And, hey, like the imam say, 'if she burn the rice, compliment her on the beans.'"

He stood and looked around the kitchen. Maymuna's mother pointed with her chin towards the eggs. He nodded and washed his hands, then set to cracking eggs into a mixing bowl.

Maymuna smiled and finished slicing the strawberries. She suddenly wished Ahmed and his mother weren't coming over, that she could hold this moment with her mom and dad, listening to their banter and stories, witnessing the fluidity of their movements, forever. Then she thought about the tenderness awaiting her and Ahmed, the memories they would build together, and her heart quickened.

The doorbell rang, shaking her out of her reverie. She set the plate of fruit on the dining table and headed to the front door. She'd imagined various renditions of this moment over the past few days. In one, his mother wore a stiff black suit, her face a mask of interrogation. In another, she'd worn a jewel-toned shalwar kameez with a matching duppata thrown across her shoulders, the air around her perfumed with roses and contempt. Maymuna took a deep breath, straightened her posture, and opened the door.

Ahmed and his mother sported matching smiles, excited with the slightest hint of nervousness, probably not unlike Maymuna's. Ahmed stood handsome in gray slacks and a blue button-down shirt. She'd only ever seen him in jeans and Converse. His black hair was

thick and wavy and covered his ears; that plus his ‘aww shucks’ grin had reminded Maymuna of Aladdin when she first met him six months ago. The woman standing next to him shared his warm, cinnamon-colored skin. Her straight black hair spilled like ink down the crisp white shirt she wore with slim black pants and royal blue leather loafers. A single gold bangle hung from her fine-boned wrist. Simple but elegant.

Ahmed stepped aside to let his mother cross the threshold first.

“Salaam alaikum, sweetie,” she said, extending her arms for a hug. Maymuna had to duck down to accept the kisses his mother proffered to her cheeks. She stepped back and held Maymuna’s hands in hers. “Ahmed didn’t tell me you were such a beauty, but I’m not surprised. I could tell by the sound of his voice over the phone that I had to get over here quickly.”

The anxiety Maymuna had carried over the last few weeks melted away. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

They walked into the living room where Maymuna’s parents were coming in from the kitchen.

“Ms. Ali, these are my parents,” she said, gesturing towards them. Before she could continue to introduce them, Ahmed’s mother swatted at Maymuna’s arm.

“What’s this Ms. Ali stuff? No, call me Ammi.”

Maymuna could see Ahmed smiling at her out of the corner of her eye, but she ignored his told-you-so look.

“Okay...Ammi.”

Ahmed and Ammi walked over to greet Maymuna’s parents. Ammi hugged Maymuna’s mother and extended her hand to Maymuna’s father.

“It’s so lovely to meet you both,” she said. “May God reward you for being so welcoming of my son.” She reached back and squeezed Ahmed’s forearm.

Ahmed stepped forward. “Sir,” he said, shaking her father’s hand. Maymuna’s father grasped Ahmed’s hand in both of his. Ahmed held a bouquet of flowers towards her mother. “Mrs. Abdullah,” he said, formally.

Maymuna’s mother smiled and accepted the flowers graciously. Maymuna stifled a chuckle. It had become a joke between her and Ahmed. The first time he met her parents, he’d brought flowers. Then the next time he was invited over, he brought flowers again. Because he’d brought them the second time, he now felt obligated to bring a bouquet every time he came over.

Maymuna had teased him about it over the phone. “You’re going to be stuck bringing her flowers for the rest of your life,” she’d said, then blushed at the entwined future her words suggested.

He’d paused briefly, then said, “That wouldn’t be so bad,” in a stark voice that made her shiver.

Now he stood in front of her parents in a suit, all traces of boyishness erased. Thankfully he didn’t look her way, her wanting for him made her feel unclothed.

“May told us this is your first time coming to Louisville?” Maymuna’s mother said.

“Yes, it is. From what I’ve seen so far it’s gorgeous. I can’t wait for May to show me around the city.” She whipped her head around at Maymuna and smiled. Ahmed had told her his mother liked to shop, so Maymuna planned to take her to Fourth Street, the outdoor shopping district downtown, after brunch.

Maymuna's father ushered Ammi and Ahmed into the dining room. Ammi gushed over the spread of food and complimented Maymuna's mother on the table decorations. She'd never had grits before, a fact she confessed with a child-like glee that made everybody laugh. She piled her plate with eggs and grits, a heaping portion of scalloped potatoes, and generously buttered biscuits, taking dainty bites of everything right after she put them on her plate.

"Save some for the rest of us," Ahmed said, smiling embarrassedly at Maymuna's parents.

"No," Maymuna's mother protested. "There's plenty."

"Everything just looks so tasty," Ammi said, her fork hovering over her plate.

Maymuna studied Ammi as she chatted comfortably with her parents. Ahmed's father had died of a heart attack when Ahmed was ten years old. Ammi had never remarried. She devoted all of her time to her children, trying to fill the hole their father's absence left in their lives. He said he'd never once seen her cry. There wasn't a trace of sorrow on Ammi's smooth face, no indication of the tragedy that had certainly marred her life.

Ahmed's father had been a top neurosurgeon in Boston. Observing Ammi's easy grace, the way she propped her elbow on the back of her chair and turned her whole body towards Maymuna's parents as they spoke, nodding along to every word, Maymuna could imagine her at dinner parties and fundraisers, giving compliments and laughing at lame jokes, making everyone she turned her smile on feel special. She had a knack for asking personal questions that showed curiosity rather than nosiness, a genuine desire to get to know the person she was speaking to. She spoke mostly to Maymuna's parents, but cast frequent reassuring smiles and winks at Maymuna across the table.

Maymuna stood and gathered up the dirty dishes to take to the kitchen. Her father had tried to take Ammi's plate earlier when she'd stopped eating, but she'd insisted on carrying it out herself. Maymuna lifted the trash lid to scrape the scattered remains from the pans when she noticed a large pile of balled-up napkins. She pushed them aside with a fork and found all the brunch offerings, including a large mound of grits, everything almost completely intact, only a few small bites missing. She was frowning over the contents when her mother walked in with more dishes.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

Maymuna quickly pushed the napkins back on top of the food and started scraping the plates. "Yeah, sure," she replied.

Her mother set the dishes on the counter then walked over to Maymuna.

"She seems really nice, baby girl. Very warm."

"Yeah, I think so," Maymuna responded.

Her mother stood in front of her and rubbed her arms. They were the same height now, and mirror images of each other with the same sloped, honey-colored eyes and sprinkle of moles across their cheekbones. The skin around her mother's nose began to bloom with rosy color, the same way Maymuna's did when she was about to cry. She rested her warm hand on Maymuna's cheek, then turned back to the sink.

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Maymuna and Ammi arrived at Fourth Street in the afternoon. It was a gorgeous autumn Saturday, the air cool and clean, and the sidewalks filled with people in light coats and sweaters. Ammi took a picture with her phone of a neon sign with the different ways people pronounced 'Louisville' then read them out loud, laughing at each one. "Loo-uh-ville?" she tried. Then she gave the phone to Maymuna to take a picture of her in front of a large signed photograph of Muhammad Ali, Louisville's native son, mimicking his famous fighting stance. Maymuna giggled at this petite woman scowling at the camera with her fists up.

Ammi was a careful shopper, rubbing the fabric of a silk dress between her fingers, examining the stitching on throw pillows. She bought a pair of dark green palazzo pants and a tunic with elaborate beadwork stitched around the collar. At an accessory boutique, she purchased matching sets of gold hoop earrings with tiny dangling pearls for her two daughters, then selected two silk scarves, one with a blue and white watercolor pattern for Maymuna's mother, the other purple with white lilies scattered across for Maymuna.

Maymuna demurred. "Oh no, you don't have to do that."

Ammi waved away her objections. Truthfully, it wasn't a design Maymuna would have chosen for herself, but she'd find something to wear it with, at least when Ammi visited.

The two women walked around the shopping district clutching their jackets tighter. The air grew colder, the wind more biting, as the sky darkened. Ammi wrapped her arm around Maymuna's and began to talk about Ahmed.

"I knew something was up the moment I heard his voice. It rose almost to a squeak, like when he was a boy and he wanted something from me, in this case my blessing," she said. She patted Maymuna's forearm with her other hand then continued. "It's something

you'll understand when you're a mother, but we can't help but want to protect our children. They stay our babies, you know, even when they are grown up."

Maymuna thought of her mother's watery eyes in the kitchen and nodded.

"It's so good that your parents are so accepting of Ahmed. So progressive," she continued.

Maymuna frowned. She'd never considered her parents acceptance of Ahmed in terms of progress.

"Times have changed so much, and I'm glad for that. A union like yours would have been unthinkable in my generation," Ammi said. "Some people are slower to catch up with the changes though. We Pakistanis are still so insular sometimes."

Maymuna's jaw tightened. Her teeth would begin to chatter soon. She needed to get out of the cold. Ammi kept talking, her voice almost dream-like, as if she were talking to the darkening sky instead of Maymuna.

"I just worry—I just think, maybe you guys should think a bit more about this, you know. I mean, *I'm* okay with it, but..."

Ammi stopped in front of an electronics store. She reached out and clasped Maymuna's hands in hers. Their warmth didn't cut the chill that crept into Maymuna's. Behind Ammi, a poster of the latest Batman movie hung in the window, Heath Ledger sneered down at Maymuna with his bloody-mouthed smile. The lights from the store cast shadows across Ammi's smiling face. Her cranberry-colored lipstick had bled a little into the right corner of her mouth.

"Ahmed told me you want to continue on with graduate school after you finish your bachelor's, if you can get a scholarship," she said, her voice turning up into a question on the

last phrase. “I could help you with your tuition. I’d be happy to. And, who knows, maybe you might decide you want to wait a little while to get married, build a career first.”

Maymuna stared at Ammi, her lips parting slightly. What Ammi was suggesting would mean delaying marriage for several years. Ahmed wouldn’t want to wait that long, and neither would she. They were observant Muslims, they didn’t date. They could never be alone together, never even really touch each other, until they wed. It wouldn’t be long before she or he would break off the engagement. Ammi knew that, she had to know what she was proposing would tear them apart. Maymuna slipped her hands from Ammi’s and put them in her pockets. Ammi smiled expectantly at her. Her face hadn’t changed the entire time she spoke, the entire day for that matter.

“Did you enjoy the brunch?” Maymuna asked. “You sure had a lot of food on your plate.”

Ammi’s smile faltered. Something like fear flickered across her face, then vanished. “Oh,” she stammered, then recovered. “My eyes were bigger than my stomach,” she laughed.

Maymuna nodded. “We should go now,” she said.

In the car on the way to Ahmed’s apartment, Ammi reassumed the role she’d played at brunch. Undeterred by Maymuna’s silence, she chattered animatedly about her college days and her career as a dentist, about being a working mother, as if she were merely picking up the dropped thread of their last conversation.

“Khalid, my husband, was so supportive of my decision to work, even though I didn’t have to. Our families and friends didn’t understand, but he stood by me.” She paused. Her voice dropped. “You know, it was so hard losing Khalid. And Ahmed, he’s my only son.



Sometimes I think I just want to keep him to myself a little bit longer. I'm afraid of losing him."

They were stopped at a red light. Maymuna studied Ammi's profile. Her head was bent down to her chest, her curtain of black hair almost covering her face. She curled it behind her ear and turned to Maymuna with a weak smile. The sadness etched into Ammi's face was as real as the smile she'd worn when Maymuna opened the door to her hours earlier. Maymuna felt like she had entered a hall of mirrors. She didn't know what was real.

They pulled up in front of Ahmed's apartment and Maymuna helped Ammi get her shopping bags out of the trunk. She waited by her car while Ammi brought the bags in. Ammi came back out with Ahmed trailing behind her. He was still wearing his clothes from earlier, now with a black blazer.

"Who's hungry?" he said, smiling excitedly.

"I'm starving," Ammi declared. She glanced at Maymuna.

"Actually," Maymuna started, "I'm not feeling well." Ammi stiffened. Ahmed took a step towards her, his brow creased with concern. Maymuna held up her hand. "No, it's okay. I just probably need to lie down for a little while."

"Are you sure?" Ahmed asked. "Come," he pleaded. "We'll get a booth and you can curl up with a cup of tea."

His smile was deliciously tempting, but Maymuna refused. Ammi stood next to him in a stupor. She blinked, then came back to life.

"Oh, honey," she purred, "Are you sure? It has been a long day." She opened her arms to hug Maymuna. "Feel better, okay?"

Maymuna accepted the hug and felt tears prick her eyes. She hugged Ammi back. The embrace held a note of finality.

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Late that night, Ahmed called her while she lay in her bed. Ammi's words swam in circles around Maymuna's head. She'd spent the evening wondering whether she should tell Ahmed about what his mother had said. Hearing his voice heavy with affection for her, she made up her mind.

"Ahmed, your mother—"

"My mom talked about you all night," he said.

"She did?"

"Yeah. She went on and on about how intelligent and thoughtful you were, how level-headed." Maymuna could hear the smile in his voice. He meted out his next words. "She said she thought you would make a wonderful wife...for me."

"She did?" Maymuna repeated.

Those words were supposed to make her heart take flight, but now they thudded against her chest. *We can't help but want to protect our children*, Ammi had said. Maymuna understood now that meant protecting them for their parent's own ugliness as well.

Maymuna thought of the dreamy, faraway look of Ahmed's eyes when he talked about his mother, the awe in his voice when he spoke of all his mother had done for him and

his sisters, his affection for her evident in the way he put his arm around her. If she accused Ammi of trying to bribe her to break them up, it would be like a pebble entering a perfect universe, throwing the rotation of all the planets off course. Maymuna didn't want to be the one to crush his world like that. She, too, wanted to protect him.

He would propose soon. If Maymuna accepted, their marriage would be built upon this secret, this truth of what his mother really thought of them together. She couldn't tell this truth, but she couldn't live a lie either.

The box with the purple scarf Ammi had bought her sat on the nightstand. The clerk had wrapped it up in a white box and tied a pale blue ribbon around it. She ran her hand over the soft ribbon, then picked up the box and tossed it in the trash.

“What were you saying?” Ahmed asked.

“Hm?”

“You were about to say something. About my mother.”

Maymuna took a deep breath. “No. I wasn't going to say anything.”

## Tam + Cam 4ever

Tamara wedged her car into a spot at the end of the fire lane in front of her younger sister Cameron's dorm. It was Friday before fall break at Louisiana State University, and the campus was packed with students. Duffel bags, backpacks, and rucksacks stuffed with dirty laundry lined the curb. Tamara bit at a hangnail on her thumb and scanned the crowds, muddling over Cameron's recent behavior.

It started at the end of the summer after one of Cameron's high school classmates died. Cameron and the girl weren't good friends, but she had gone to the funeral. She'd come back with a dry face and clear eyes, in a stoic silence. A few days later, before leaving to head back to Baton Rouge, she'd announced that she planned to stay on campus till break. Freshmen year she'd come home almost every weekend, with Tamara happily obliged to pick her up. They'd spend the weekend going to parties and clubs, then toast their hangovers with ginger ale and salted crackers on the drive back on Sundays. Their parents cheered Cameron's plan. It was sophomore year, time to get serious. Tamara took the news as a rebuff, but concealed her hurt with a simpering smile. Even now, in the car, she nursed the lingering sting. She was being petulant, she knew, but fell short of chiding herself.

Girls hung in clusters on and around the front stairway, the tinkle of their collective laughter like overactive wind chimes. Usually Tamara spotted Cameron by her wild curly hair. Last time she came to pick her up, she'd seen the purple streaks in Cameron's hair before she even pulled in the lot. She changed her hair often; cornrows, Bantu knots, box

braids, butterfly clips, it was always something different. With her brightly patterned button-down shirts and heavy black boots, she usually looked like she'd stepped out of a '90's black sitcom.

Tamara noticed a group of girls in headscarves huddled under a massive oak tree, and just as her eyes bounced off them back to the door, one of the girls in a long black skirt and a navy blue scarf detached herself and headed towards Tamara's car. She opened the back door and tossed in her backpack and a tote bag, then slipped into the front seat with a satisfied huff.

"Hey."

Tamara blinked several times, staring at the stranger in her front seat. "Hey?" she said.

Cameron pressed her lips together. Her face was clean of makeup, a slender hole where her nose ring usually nested. "We should go," she said.

Tamara looked at the wheel like she'd forgotten how to drive. "Okay." She put her foot on the gas and the engine revved. "Oh." She fumbled for the gear shift and switched it into drive.

They rode in complete silence. Every question Tamara crafted died on her tongue when she looked at her sister out of the corner of her eye. 'What the hell?' was what she wanted to say. Cameron sat back looking out the window, shadows of trees passing across her face. They were halfway to New Orleans before Cameron finally spoke.

"I know you're wondering why I'm dressed this way," she said. She turned sideways in her seat to face Tamara.

Tamara pretended to be absorbed by the road in front of her. “Hmm? Oh no, I didn’t notice anything different.” She cut her eyes at Cameron in a dramatic side-eye.

Cameron let out a snort of laughter. Finally, something approaching normal.

Cameron parsed her words out slowly, like she wasn’t sure how they would land. “I, uhm, I converted. To Islam. I’m a Muslim.”

Tamara nodded. She was angry and hurt, the same peevishness she’d felt when Cameron told her she was going to stay on campus for the weekends. It was the kind of anger she had to keep to herself, because it was unjustified. She dug her nails into the steering wheel, trying to think of something positive to say, something encouraging and supportive. “That’s nice,” she finally offered in a monotone.

She turned on the radio. Garbled zydeco music whined out from the speakers. She didn’t change the station. Cameron was looking at her, her mouth opening and closing like a fish waiting for bait. Tamara kept her eyes on the road. She could feel Cameron blush; heat crept up to her own cheeks. Cameron huffed lightly and shifted in her seat, turning back towards the window.

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Walking up the driveway to their parent’s home, Tamara wondered how they’d react to Cameron’s new look. She figured they’d be just as shocked as she had been, maybe even angry. They weren’t irreligious, but they didn’t go to church either, except for weddings and

funerals. Before Tamara could even put the key in the lock, their mother swung the door open and stepped onto the threshold. Here it comes.

“Oh my goodness, look at you,” their mother said, grabbing Cameron into a hug. Their mother was short and shaped like a peach, all bosomy curves and rolls. The sisters were tall and thin like their dad. She gently pinched the edge of Cameron’s headscarf. “You look so pretty. Wait till your dad sees you.” Cameron ducked her head and laughed, then stole a look at Tamara.

They knew. Cameron had already told them.

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At the dinner table, Tamara pushed her food around her plate while her parents and Cameron talked. They were mostly concerned with if Cameron was being treated okay at school, if anybody had bothered her.

“No, everything’s fine mostly,” Cameron said. “I get a few looks, but most people are nice and friendly, or just normal, you know. Indifferent.” She laughed. “And my friends in the MSA—the Muslim Students Association—we hang out and walk to classes together, so I’m not alone usually.”

Tamara noticed her mom and dad were being careful with their words, asking sensitive questions.

“So the thing—I mean your scarf, it’s called a hee-jab right, am I saying it right?” their dad asked.

“You’re overemphasizing the first syllable, Dad,” Tamara said, by way of contributing something to the conversation.

“Well, yeah, it’s hijab,” Cameron replied. “But some people pronounce it like that too. It’s okay.”

Their dad looked relieved. Was that sweat on his forehead? Their mom smiled sweetly at Cameron and kept patting her hand.

“And you know your sister’s doing well at the station, Cam,” their mom said. She looked at Tamara’s plate, then up to Tamara.

“Yeah? Oh gosh, sorry Tam, I didn’t even think to ask,” Cameron said.

Tamara had started out as an intern with Fox8 News when she graduated college the year before, and had recently been promoted to production assistant.

“That’s awesome. Congratulations,” said Cameron. She squeezed Tamara’s wrist and smiled.

Tamara managed a weak smile and wished for dinner to be over so she could escape to her bedroom. She was saving to get her own place, and right then she wished she had it.

Their dad clapped his hands together then spread his arms wide to encompass both his daughters. “My TamCam,” he said. “Together again.”

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Tamara lay in bed that night, the blades of the ceiling fan rotating slowly above her, slicing the shadow the tree outside her window cast along the wall.



TamCam. Their dad had called them that for as long as she could remember. “You sure y’all aren’t joined at the hip?” he’d asked when they were kids. “Let me see.” Then he tickled their bellies until they collapsed into giggles on the floor.

It was true. They did everything together; played the same games, listened to the same music, and even bought the same clothes. All their friends knew they were a two-for-one deal. If you wanted to hang out with Tamara, you’d have to be okay with Cameron tagging along, and vice versa.

But if Tamara allowed herself to be honest, it was usually vice versa. Tamara liked to believe that Cameron had been her shadow, her tag-along, but that had never really been the case. It was Tamara who mimicked Cameron’s style, borrowing heavily from her little sister’s wardrobe. It was Tamara who slipped herself into Cameron’s circles. No one ever commented on it, but Tamara remembered the times Cameron’s friends had stiffened ever so slightly when Tamara joined them. If any of it registered as strange to Cameron, she never hinted at it. She was generous with her things and even encouraged Tamara by showing her how to pull an outfit together, and offering to do her hair and makeup. Any events or parties she was invited to, she always extended to Tamara.

It was Cameron who came up with the idea for the binder when they were adolescents. “Like MASH, but better,” she’d said. They’d gathered up all their teen magazines and cut out pictures of cute boys, clothes, and jewelry, and houses and cars from their mom and dad’s old magazines, gluing them on construction paper with glitter and sequins surrounding them. They’d put all the pages together in a big purple binder with “Tam + Cam 4ever” written in black permanent marker across the cover.

They had planned out their whole lives together on a life map that folded out over several pages with accompanying drawings. They would live next door to each other— whoever they married would have to agree to that—and they would always take vacations together. They'd each have two kids, a girl and a boy, and their kids would be best friends too. They would grow old together, sitting on their porch, sipping iced tea, and watching their grandchildren play. That was the plan.

Tamara wasn't so naive to think that was exactly how things would go, but the essence of it, their lives overlapping each other's, that she still believed in. Cameron becoming Muslim upset the plan. It made the future murky. It threatened to make it more solitary.

Maybe Islam was just a phase, a new look Cameron was trying on, like the temporary hair dyes she washed out every week. That was it. That had to be it. She'd just have to ride it out and wait till Cameron moved on to something else, something that didn't exclude Tamara.

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The weekend before Thanksgiving break, Cameron sent Tamara a text saying she didn't need a ride home. She was going to stay in Baton Rouge till Thursday, volunteering for a holiday feeding at a mission with the MSA, and then one of her friends was going to drop her off at their aunt's home for dinner.

*C U at turkey time :-p*, Cameron signed the text.

Tamara huffed. She'd hoped to spend some time with Cameron during the break. She tossed the phone on the bed next to her without responding, then scooped it back up.

*K can't wait to see you <3*, she replied.

So the Muslim thing was still in effect. Tamara had been reading up on the religion online, although a lot of the top hits on Google turned out to be Islamophobic sites with crazy “facts” that couldn't possibly be true. She thought about asking Cameron for some legitimate resources, but felt awkward about bringing it up. Instead she'd asked her co-worker who got so excited by her question that he now regularly left pamphlets on her desk with titles like “Was Jesus Really Crucified?” and “Proof of Muhammad in the Bible” that didn't help her understand Cameron's conversion. What she really needed was a pamphlet titled, “How To Talk To Your Sister When She Converts to Islam And You Feel Left Out.”

Tamara was determined to break through the awkward silence that now cloaked their relationship. So what if Cameron was a Muslim? They could still talk like they used to, with no filters. Maybe they could even go to a party or a club. They didn't have to drink to have a good time, right? All they needed was each other. They could still be TamCam.

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Cameron arrived at their aunt's house close to evening, dressed in a long merlot-colored dress and a rose-printed headscarf. Some of their family members tensed up at her appearance, but quickly softened with her smiles and hugs.

The aunties and grandmas all proclaimed Cameron a “doll, just a doll,” and asked her how she wrapped her scarf and could she show them how she pinned it. Then they set to work piling turkey and dressing on her plate ‘cause didn’t she look too thin and what was she eating in that lousy school cafeteria hmm?

Tamara finally stole a moment with her sister in the kitchen after everyone had eaten and gathered around the television to watch football. Cameron stood at a counter covered in bottles of soda and alcohol.

“Hey, you,” Tamara said, bumping Cameron playfully with her shoulder. Cameron poured Coke into a red plastic cup filled with ice and smiled.

“Did you have fun being fawned over?” Tamara asked. “You’re such a doll, you know.”

Cameron scrunched her nose up. “Yeah, that was weird,” she said. “Where do they even get that from?”

“Probably too many Lifetime movies,” said Tamara. She poured her own cup of Coke then splashed a little rum into it. “But hey, you wanna sneak out of here? They’re in there half dead from all that turkey. One of my friends is having a party at her house. No senior citizens allowed. Wanna go?”

Cameron adjusted the lid on a pot of cold gumbo. “Oh, uhm, that sounds nice, but I can’t,” she said.

Tamara waited for an explanation but none came. “Why not?” she ventured.

“I just—I don’t think it’s a good idea. The crowd, you know?” She smoothed the edge of her hijab.

“It’s just a house party, Cam. Not much different from this one.”

Cameron tilted her head. “Yeah, no, I think I’ll pass. I’m tired.”

Tamara fought back an urge to roll her eyes. “Well let’s just hang out at home then. Watch a movie?” she offered.

“What? No, Tam, you should definitely go.”

Tamara pursed her lips. “Well,” she scoffed.

“Come on, Tam, don’t be that way. I’m just exhausted from midterms. I’ll be knocked out before the opening credits finish. Go and have fun. Mama says you need a boyfriend.”

Tamara laughed despite herself. “Mama needs to mind her business.”

Cameron swatted at her with a napkin and laughed.

“Fine,” said Tamara. “I’ll go. By myself.” She sighed dramatically, then pointed at Cameron. “But after the semester ends you’re coming with me.”

Cameron smiled but didn’t respond.

The rest of the weekend went by in a blur. Cameron went out Friday afternoon to attend jumaah, Friday prayers, at a mosque, but other than that she spent most of her time in her room studying, only coming down for food. Early Sunday morning, her bags were packed and ready at the door. She wanted to get back to school early so she could work on a paper.

They all stood on the porch, huddled against the morning chill, waiting for Cameron’s ride to arrive. Her friend, an olive-skinned young woman wearing a bright pink hijab, pulled up. Their parents walked over to talk to the friend, leaving Cameron and Tamara to say goodbye to each other. They hugged.

“We’ll definitely hang out when I get back,” Cameron said, holding Tamara’s hands.

“Yeah, sure,” Tamara said, running her thumbs along the delicate bones of her sister’s knuckles.

Tamara pulled Cameron in for another hug, wrapping her arms around her sister’s neck. Cameron held Tamara around the waist, resting her cheek on Tamara’s shoulder. They let go and Tamara watched Cameron walk away, white light from the sun humming around her pale blue headscarf.

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Christmas break arrived and Cameron came home lugging two overstuffed suitcases and a backpack loaded with old textbooks and notebooks. Tamara had bags and boxes too. She’d found an apartment and was moving out after the new year.

Some of the awkwardness of the past few months had faded away between the two sisters. Cameron was visibly more relaxed, her limbs loose, the tired, pinched midterm face gone. She was up for shrimp po-boys, trips to the mall, movies, whatever. She and Tamara spent whole days vegging out in front of the TV, muting the volume on old shows and making up their own dialogue.

Cameron even went to a few parties with Tamara, tying her scarf in a turban style and putting on a little dark red lipstick. She chatted nervously with guys and refused any offers to dance, clutching her cup of soda close to her chest like it was a life preserver. Clubs and bars were off limits though. She’d go off in the evenings to events at the different mosques, always in long, loose skirts and tops that came well below her hips. Tamara was curious

about the mosque, just to know what it looked like and what they did in there, but still she couldn't bring herself to say or ask anything related to her sister's religion. It dangled, heavily, yet quietly, between them.

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Christmas day came and they drove out to their uncle's house in Slidell for dinner. Tamara and Cameron sat next to each other in the backseat, staring out of each other's windows.

"Is this weird for you?" Tamara asked.

They were crossing the Causeway Bridge over Lake Pontchartrain. Seagulls skimmed the surface of the water, causing ripples that glinted in the bright sunlight. It was a cloudless day, and cold, the sky an icy blue.

Cameron's purple scarf was pulled low over her forehead, casting a shadow across her face. "Hm?" she said, turning to Tamara.

"Christmas dinner," Tamara said. "Is it weird now? You know, since you don't celebrate anymore."

Their father, in the driver's seat, turned his head slightly to the backseat. Their mother sat up front with her face rigidly fixed on the road.

"Oh. No, it's fine. I'm looking forward to seeing everybody," Cameron said.

Tamara sniffed. She was feeling uncharitable towards her sister. The morning had been weird. After breakfast, their parents had brought gifts for them to the dining table.

Cameron had fingered the red ribbon tied around a box covered in green wrapping paper decorated with snowmen, not opening it.

“I’m sorry, I—I didn’t get you guys anything,” Cameron had stammered. “I thought—I didn’t think…”

Their mother had looked pained. Their father had jumped in trying to make a joke out of it.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said. “Hey, y’all getting too old for Christmas gifts anyway, huh? Tam, you wanna stop celebrating Christmas too?” He’d cackled and slapped his thigh, cracking himself up.

“I think I’ll make myself another cup of coffee,” their mother had said in a quiet voice, getting up from the table.

Cameron had excused herself, saying she needed to get ready, and taken the gift upstairs, holding it like it was a bomb. Tamara had glowered at her sister’s departing figure.

Their arrival at their uncle’s stately home revived everyone’s spirits. The house was packed with people, family and friends of family—their mother’s side, so she was happy. She huddled with her sisters and their husbands in the living room. Bursts of laughter fired out randomly like the clucking of chickens. They ate and drank, and drank some more, shouting at each other and grabbing loose children around the waist, wrestling them in for hugs and kisses that left red stains on their cheeks and foreheads.

Cameron spent most of the evening tucked into a corner of the couch, sometimes talking but mostly not. Tamara ignored her and downed glasses of wine, playing spades on the frigid back patio with the other young adults. When night came, she and her cousin Damond slipped away down to the edge of their uncle’s lake to smoke a blunt.



Damond perched on a rock rolling the blunt, cigar innards scattered in front of him. Tamara stood behind his shoulder holding a bottle of beer, staring out at the black water. She was just beginning to wonder if there might be alligators lurking in the water when she heard the crunch of dead grass behind them. Moonlight shone on Cameron's face.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," Tamara responded, turning back to the water.

"What's up, cuz?" Damond said. He leaned over the blunt.

Cameron laughed. "You don't have to hide, Damond."

"Man, I didn't wanna, you know, mess with your holiness," he said.

"Whatever," Cameron said.

Damond licked at the edge of blunt, then sealed it with his thumb.

"So what's it like?" he asked. "You know, being a Muslim?"

"It's...nice. I don't know. It's like finding the last piece of a puzzle you've been searching for. It's like I know why I'm here now, what my purpose is."

Damond bobbed his head. "That's dope."

Tamara took a slow sip of her beer. How was it that their weed-head cousin could talk so easily about Cameron's conversion, but Tamara couldn't?

"All this time, I felt lost, like I had no home," Cameron said. "And then I found Islam. Or it found me. It's like it was always there."

Tamara let out a harsh, guttural laugh.

"What, Tam?"

Tamara turned to Cameron and smirked. "You had to go find yourself? You felt homeless? You sound like a white girl."

“You sound drunk,” Cameron shot back. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t understand and you don’t even try.”

“What’s to understand? You’re doing what you wanna do. Ms. High and Mighty, on the holy road. I get it. Whatever.”

“That’s not it, Tam. You think I think I’m better than other people. You’re so far from the truth. Don’t you know what it’s like to feel alone and afraid, to need comfort and hope? I’m trying to tell you. I was in the dark, and it was terrifying. And then I picked up a Quran, and it was light, light all around me, light that opened up my whole life, so I could see everything, all of it. And it was beautiful. But you don’t want to know that, do you?”

Tamara could hear the tears in Cameron’s voice, the pleading. The beer and wine and food soured in her stomach. She knew exactly what it was like to feel alone and afraid. Cameron turned to walk away.

“You could have told me,” Tamara muttered at her sister’s back.

Cameron spun around. “Is that what this is about? Tam.” She paused and put her fist in front of her mouth, then dropped it. “Tam, you need to grow up.”

Tamara scoffed. “Screw you, Cam. Have you forgotten *I’m* the older sister?”

“Well then act like it!” Cameron shouted. “Stop following me around and be your own person. Stop moping around and waiting around for me to give you a life. I’m trying to make my own.”

“Then go do it,” Tamara shot back. “I don’t need you!”

Cameron’s departing footsteps shuffled in the wet grass. Damond stood up and stuffed the blunt and the bag of weed in his pocket. He walked over to Tamara and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Y’all gon’ be alright cuz.” He patted her shoulder then walked back towards the house.

Tamara stood alone and painfully sober. Angry tears trickled down her face. She wiped roughly at them. She thought of the light Cameron talked about, tried to imagine it. Her path ahead was as obscure as the trees in the distance she knew were there but could not see. She needed a light to show her where to go and what to do. Other than her job at the news station—a job her parents had to push her to pursue—what did she have? What life was she building? She hadn’t ever truly considered it. She had allowed Cameron to be her light, content to follow its glow.

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Tamara was in her new living room surrounded by boxes and containers when the doorbell rang. Cameron stood on the threshold in a bulky purple sweatshirt, the hood pulled halfway over her white headscarf, a silver hoop nose ring back in its former place. It had been weeks since she and Tamara had seen each other, weeks since Cameron had quietly packed her things and gone to stay with a friend until it was time to go back to school. Weeks of not talking to each other beyond a few cursory texts. Cameron held a white box in her hands.

“Chantilly cake,” she said, holding the box up.

“Shouldn’t I be on that side of the door?” Tamara asked. She stepped back and waved Cameron in. “Come inside, it’s freezing.”

Cameron set the cake down on the bar countertop that connected the kitchen with the living room. She walked over to the sliding glass doors that led to a balcony. The sky was gray, the tree limbs barren and arthritic. It was early afternoon but looked like evening.

“I like your place,” she said, turning back to Tamara and scanning the many half-unpacked boxes that littered the floor. A lonely tan-colored couch sat in the middle of the mess.

“Thanks. I can’t seem to find time to unpack.”

“I’m sorry,” Cameron said.

“I’m the one who needs to apologize Cam.”

“No—well, yes. But I’m sorry. I should have told you. I don’t know. I was scared.”

Cameron stuffed her hands into the pockets of her sweatshirt. “I only told Mama and Daddy that day when you were on the way to pick me up. I don’t know. I didn’t know how to tell anybody without it feeling like I was confessing something, like it was a bad thing.”

Tamara nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

She sat down on the couch and patted the space next to her. Cameron kicked her sneakers off and folded her legs in. “I was worried things were going to be weird between us,” she said. “And then I realized I made them weird by not telling you.”

“I’m sorry too,” Tamara said. “I was such a bitch to you.”

Cameron opened her mouth then closed it back. “Yeah, you were,” she said with a tilt of her head.

Tamara tutted and threw a pillow at Cameron. Cameron laughed and pulled the pillow to her chest, resting her chin on it.

“But,” she said, hesitantly, “I said some things I shouldn’t have, or not in the right way. I didn’t mean what I said about you not having a life.” She glanced at Tamara, then looked back down at her lap.

This was the part where Tamara was supposed to say it was okay, of course she knew Cameron didn’t mean it, but that would be a lie. The truth sat between them, silent, unacknowledged, but known. She got up and rummaged through some of the boxes. Underneath shoeboxes filled with photos and her high school yearbook she found the purple binder, its edges bent, and the plastic cover torn, ‘Tam + Cam 4ever’ almost completely smudged out. She handed it to Cameron.

Cameron’s eyes widened. “You still have this?” she asked.

She cracked it open and pages fell at her feet, dusting her socks with glitter. Over the years they had added photos of themselves together. The two of them in bathing suits on a beach celebrating Cameron’s sweet sixteen, Tamara perched on a stool in a silver sequined halter dress for her senior prom, Cameron in front of her holding a makeup brush, their heads flung back laughing at one of their father’s famously lame jokes, the two of them in denim shorts and tank tops sitting on the bed of a pick-up truck at the Lakefront, clutching red plastic cups and their arms wrapped tightly around each other. People around them in the shadows, but always the two of them together.

Cameron flipped through the pages until she got to the life map they’d made. She folded it out and traced the wending path with her finger. There were stops along the way for college and careers, Cameron in front of a gilded sign shouting Cam’s Styles, her hair a fright of indigo spirals, Tamara in heels and a pencil skirt, holding a briefcase, marriage at a trellis dripping with lilies, two faceless grooms at their sides. Children, travel destinations,

and then down to the bottom, Cameron's comical drawing of two old women, their eyes folded into wrinkled flesh, beaming with toothless smiles, holding each other up with their wilted arms.

Cameron laughed and shook her head. "God. We were so silly." She shut the book and set it on the lid of a half-open box in front of her. It sagged, then collapsed into the box.

"Yeah, silly," Tamara said, pushing her words through the tightening in her throat.

Cameron stretched her legs in front of her, then looked over at the flat screen television mounted above the fireplace. "Well I see you got the TV hooked up," she said.

"Yeah," Tamara mumbled, grabbing the remote off the coffee table and turning the TV on. She browsed through the program listings.

"Oh look, *Sixteen Candles* is coming on," Cameron said.

Tamara's thumb hovered over the select button. "Can Muslim girls even do *Sixteen Candles*?" she asked.

"Muslim girls can do anything with Jake Ryan in it."

"Except Jake Ryan."

"Touché."

Tamara managed a smile. This was the sisterly moment she'd been craving for months, but now it all felt forced, hollow.

Cameron tucked into the couch then shot up, reaching for her phone.

"Wait, what time does it start?" she asked.

"Not for another fifteen minutes," Tamara said. "Why?"

"I have to pray."

Tamara muted the TV and pointed by the bar. "There's a clean spot over there."

Cameron walked over and consulted the compass on her phone, turning until she found the right direction.

“East, right?” Tamara tried. “To Mecca?”

“Actually it’s northeast from here.”

“Oh.”

Cameron pulled a small rug out of her backpack and laid it at an angle between the bar and the glass doors. She pulled her sweater down over her hips then rested her arms at her side for a moment before raising her hands to her ears. “Allahu Akbar,” she whispered.

Tamara watched her sister mouth a silent prayer, her face hidden by the shadows of the clouds covering the sun. Cameron bowed low, then kneeled to the ground, her nose and forehead pressed to the floor. She rose up on her knees then bowed down to the floor again. Her moves were fluid and certain, in full submission to an unseen power that guided her.

As Tamara watched her sister pray, the distance between them seemed to expand. Cameron wasn’t pushing her away, yet there was a space between them that could not be traversed, a space she knew would only continue to grow. She imagined if she were to try to walk to Cameron in that moment, she would just walk and walk and never reach her.

## Lost and Found

Amina lay in bed staring blankly at the swirls of dust dancing in the early morning sunlight that filtered through the half-opened window blinds. Her husband Khalid was a blurred figure in her peripheral, standing at the dresser mirror buttoning the cuffs of his pale blue work shirt. Though he was only a few steps away from her, almost close enough to touch without even leaving the bed, the sounds of his morning routine—the thunk of his wooden hairbrush set down on the dresser, the rustle of the tiny plastic comb as he raked it through his beard, the slight crack of his knuckles as he rubbed cocoa butter over his hands and face—all came to her muffled as if through a wall. Then came the creak as he sat down on the bed in the curve of space between her thighs and belly and rested a hand in the center of her back. It was too late for her to shut her eyes and feign sleep.

“Salaam alaikum,” he whispered.

His hand, gentle and warm, stroked her back. *Don't push him away, don't push him away*, she cautioned herself. Her eyes flicked to him, then back to the dust swirls.

“Wa alaikum salaam,” she mumbled back.

She was failing. Failing him, failing herself. Pulling further inward, instead of pushing out. The therapist's words. “When you want to pull in, force yourself to push out.” She was failing.

He persisted. “Gonna write that best seller today?” he asked. His laugh trembled. He was failing too, but not for lack of trying.



*When I see your face, I see the baby. That's why I can't look at you.* That's what she wanted to say, maybe needed to say. But those were the words she held back.

"Yep," she said, with an assertion she did not feel.

She forced herself to look at her husband, to give him a tight smile. Something that resembled reassurance. Something, anything, to make him go away.

His smile faltered. He turned from her and rested his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together under his chin. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it.

"I just—I want—I don't know what to say, Amina. I just want to know you're okay, I guess. Or what I can do to make things better. For you, for me, for us."

He tilted his head back and rubbed under his chin in the space where wiry hairs curled back into themselves, forming little bumps. Amina used to massage that space with coconut oil-moistened fingers, coaxing the stubborn hairs out of their nests.

"I just need time," she said, following his fingers with her eyes.

Khalid dropped his hand in his lap. "It's been six months," he said.

"I know how long it's been," Amina snapped. She stopped and softened her tone. "I know how long it's been, but I need more time to sort things out." Her throat tightened around her words. "I need to write. That's all. Get back to work, get back to routine. That's all I need."

Khalid pursed his lips and bobbed his head. "Right. Well I'll let you do your thing." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I'll see you this evening."

Amina held her breath, listening to Khalid's departing steps down the stairs. At the sound of the front door shutting, she nestled her head deeper into the pillow and closed her eyes.

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She was at a park, walking off the trail under the shade of the thick oak trees, away from the blinding brightness of the sun. A boy, her boy, trailed behind her, his small sweaty hand in hers, chattering away about nothing. A squirrel darted across their path to the delight of her son, who took off running after it. Amina stumbled over a tree root, trying to hold on to his hand, but he was too fast. His little nut brown fingers slipped out of her palm as he gave chase to the squirrel, who darted up the closest tree. Her son squealed with laughter and ran in circles around the tree, following the squirrel's movements. He was in a frenzy, running faster, too fast, and the squirrel had escaped but he couldn't stop running, and then as he circled the back of the tree once more, he was gone.

Amina stopped, alone among the oak trees. Her hands splayed out in front of her, touching nothing. She looked around among the thick trunks. She tried to call him, opened her mouth to scream his name, but she couldn't. She couldn't remember his name. A hollowness like hunger invaded her belly as the sun dropped down from the sky, blanketing everything in white blinding heat. She gasped and gripped the pillow, realizing it was just a dream, but not ready to open her eyes and face the truth. She laid on her back, breathing deeply with her hand on her chest. Her heart quieting, she thought she heard his laughter again, only the sound was different.

Laughter. Amina distinctly heard a child's laughter. Not a typical sound mid-morning on a school day. And it was close, just outside her window. Amina sat up, blinking back the dream, walked over to the window, and flicked open the blinds. Outside her window was a young girl playing, running and tossing a red rubber ball with a woman. In her yard. Her *fenced* yard.

Amina stepped back from the blinds. She folded her arms and tapped her fingers. She stepped back to the blinds. She flicked them open again and, yes, there was a girl with long brown hair tied back in a ponytail and a woman, also with long brown hair loosely hanging down her back, who must have been her mother. The woman tossed the ball back to the girl, and it bounced off her head, causing the girl to giggle hysterically. The woman put her finger to her lips and pointed towards the house.

Amina pulled a dark brown cardigan over her gray T-shirt and blue plaid pajama pants. She gathered her dark, thick hair into a bun, the curls limp and prickly against her palms because she couldn't be bothered with deep conditioning it lately, and grabbed a scarf on top of her dresser, a gauzy taupe hijab, faded and pilling, that she wore every time she had to leave the house, and wrapped it loosely around her head. At the kitchen door which led to the yard, she shoved her feet into a pair of Khalid's olive green rubber gardening shoes, hopelessly caked with mud, and stepped outside, steeling herself for a confrontation.

Amina treaded across the grass towards the intruders. The girl, poised to throw the ball, saw Amina first and stopped, clutching the ball uncertainly. The woman turned to face Amina, looking caught off guard.

"Oh, hi," she said with a short laugh.

Amina stopped a few feet away from the woman. She didn't look crazy. She had a round, pleasant face and plump cheeks that dimpled when she smiled. Her skin was a rich brown color that reminded Amina of apple cider, and in the sunlight her long, straight hair glowed amber. Standing in Amina's yard in jeans and a perfectly-fitted yellow cardigan over a white T-shirt, she exuded warmth and kindness, the kind of woman who likely had no trouble making friends. If anything, Amina, with her disheveled pajamas and her husband's awful shoes on her feet, was the crazy-looking one. Amina folded her arms and said hello.

The woman cupped her palms to her chest and spoke in a confessional tone. "I know this must look a little strange, but my daughter and I were looking for a place to play and there are no parks nearby, and we saw this great yard so I thought it might be okay for us to stop here. I hope you don't mind."

Amina looked around the yard. Was this woman serious? Who goes into someone else's yard—their *fenced* yard, because they want a place to play with their kid? Amina felt light-headed. "Uhm..."

She couldn't think of a good reason to say no, other than the yard being her property. The woman and her daughter looked harmless. Would it be so wrong to let them play?

Amina let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. "Okay," she said. "Yeah, sure," she added, with more confidence.

The woman beamed at her. "Thanks so much! My name is Gabriela, and this is my daughter, Luz," she said, gesturing towards her daughter, who stood behind her smiling shyly at Amina. Luz looked to be about ten years old. Her young skin glowed with health.

"Luz. That's a pretty name," said Amina.

“Well, I wanted to name her Arcoiris, rainbow, but my husband shot that down,” said Gabriela.

Luz rolled her eyes. “Gracias a Dios and thank you, Dad,” she said.

“Hey!” Gabriela said. She made to pinch her daughter’s cheek but Luz jumped out of her reach, giggling.

Amina felt shy watching Gabriela and Luz’s playfulness, like she was the one intruding on their space, instead of the other way around. She excused herself.

“Well you guys just...enjoy yourselves. I’m going to go inside and get myself together. Can I...can I get you all anything? Water? Juice?” Amina wasn’t sure what to offer trespassers.

“Oh no, thank you,” said Gabriela. “We’re fine. We will see you soon.”

Amina turned and headed back to the house. She definitely needed to splash some cold water on her face. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she was in a strange but pleasant dream.

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Strange as the morning was with the odd woman and her daughter, it was a break from the drudgery that Amina’s days had become. Amina was a writer, or at least she had been. She couldn’t think of an accurate word to attach to herself these days. A writer writes, a mother mothers. She was...an avoider, maybe. That was all she seemed to do now.

She still trudged dutifully up the stairs to her office every day. It was a tiny room at the end of the hall, with just enough space to fit a desk, but it had a window that let in plenty of light. That was all Amina had needed.

She loved to write first thing in the morning when her mind was bursting with stories. She loved the process: drumming her fingers on the desk, staring at the blank screen, then typing the first few words, unsure and tentative, a short pause followed by a burst of sentences, and then the words would start to move, like a steady stream of water. She would write on for hours like this until the moment arrived. The moment when the words started writing themselves, when she couldn't remember her fingers touching the keys. After hours spent writing, she felt empty, her fingers loose, her muscles relaxed, her mind clear.

Amina didn't write anymore. She opened her manuscript and skimmed through the pages, without reading a word. She scanned down to the empty white space and stared at the cursor for several minutes, but she never added a single word. The blinking cursor reminded her of a heartbeat.

Instead she escaped into the Internet, celebrity gossip and mindless social media scrolling. The numbness hit her like a drug, she sank into it. It became her safe space, a space where she didn't have to think or feel. That's where she would have been that morning, if not for the arrival of the strangers in her yard.

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Amina pulled a pan of baked chicken out of the oven, inhaling the welcoming scents of rosemary and thyme, and set it on the stove next to a pot of saffron rice. Khalid stood at the counter, the sleeves of his work shirt rolled up to his forearms, cutting fresh broccoli into florets to steam. Amina felt lighter after her morning with Gabriela, a little more energized. Their conversation had been mundane and frivolous, about how much they loved the fall season, and their mutual disdain for the pumpkin spice frenzy it brought. At Luz's urging, Gabriela had pulled out her phone to show Amina a Taylor Swift parody video making fun of basic white moms and their addiction to Starbucks. Amina had laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd talked like that, let alone laughed. She was about to tell Khalid about Gabriela and Luz when he brought up trying for another baby.

Amina pulled off the oven mitts and tossed them on the counter, turning towards the spice rack. "Khalid," she said, her chest tightening, all the lightness from the day evaporating.

Khalid gathered the florets together and dropped them in a pot of boiling water. Steam wafted up in curls around his face. He wiped his hands on a dish cloth and turned to Amina.

"The midwife said there wasn't any indication it would happen again," he said. "And Dr. Samra says it's good for us to at least start talking about it."

Amina sighed but didn't speak. He was telling her everything she already knew. She busied herself straightening the spice jars, turning them so their labels faced out.

"We're almost out of turmeric," she said.

"Amina," he said.

“I’ll get some at the store tomorrow. Some naan too. I was going to make curry this week.”

“Don’t do this,” he pleaded.

“What?”

She glanced at Khalid. His face was a contortion of expressions: frustration, impatience, a faltering love. Her hands itched for some activity. She willed them not to return to the spice jars.

Amina swallowed and gestured towards the stove with her chin. “I think the broccoli is ready.”

Khalid dropped his hands to his sides, his lips a tight line. He turned back to the stove and poured the strained broccoli into a cobalt blue ceramic bowl, one of a trio they’d been given as a wedding gift, and set it on the counter. He paused for a second, his hands still gripping the bowl, then he let go. He didn’t look at her.

“Yeah, it’s done,” he said, then walked out of the kitchen.

Amina stood at the counter, her hands no longer restless. She fixed herself a small plate and sat alone at the table, forcing herself to eat. Above her, she heard the door to Khalid’s study open and shut, then the reluctant groan of his swivel chair as he sat at his desk.

This had become their routine. He would stay there for a few hours, checking work emails or reading the words of one of his history tomes, using an old rug he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk to pray isha. He’d eventually come down, after she had retired to their bedroom, fix a hurried plate without heating it, then slip into bed facing her, thinking she was asleep. Before settling into sleep he’d lay a hand on her hip or snuggle the back of



her neck. She'd hold herself still and breathe shallowly through the encounter. That night though, he would keep his back to her and not touch her. She would only then realize how much she had come to expect it.

At the table, cutting her broccoli into small, and then smaller bites, she nibbled over her thoughts. She should want to have another baby, but the truth was she couldn't imagine herself pregnant again, hopeful and happy. Having birthed a dead baby, she couldn't imagine life coming out of her. All she could conjure was her dead child's face, his feathery eyelids and little frozen mouth, the bolt of seamless white cloth they'd wrapped his tiny body in for the janaza, the grief-choked voices reciting Surah Yasin as the pine box was laid below the earth. She couldn't imagine any capacity for joy still rested inside her. She should want to have another baby, but she did not.

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Gabriela and Luz were there the next morning. Washing her coffee mug at the kitchen sink, Amina glanced out the window and was startled to see Gabriela sitting in the grass under the sycamore tree, her legs extended and crossed at the ankles, her posture relaxed like she'd been sitting there for a while. Amina swore she had looked out the window just a few minutes previously and Gabriela hadn't been there, but she smiled at the sight just the same. She set the clean mug on the dish rack and dried her hands. At the door, she slipped on a pair of brown loafers and the pilled taupe hijab. She wore jeans and a faded navy blue jersey

tunic. No pajamas and gardening slippers; instead of going back to sleep after Khalid left, she'd gotten up and showered and dressed.

Gabriela waved to Amina and patted the grass next to her. The sour notes of the previous evening vanished when Amina sat down next to Gabriela. There was a freshness to the woman's presence that excited Amina. The air seemed to shift, gaining sweetness, the sunlight brightened, the chirping of birds became more distinct. She wanted to ask Gabriela what they were doing there in her yard, why they came here, but this space they existed in together was a delicate bubble, and Amina did not want to pierce it.

Amina watched Gabriela gaze lovingly at her daughter. Luz, in a calf-length white cotton dress with a denim jacket and red high top Converse sneakers, her hair coiled in a high bun, walked the edge of the fence, her face solemn, grasping a handful of daisies to her chest. She stopped every few steps and pulled a single daisy and whispered something to it, then tossed it to the ground. Amina asked about Luz's education.

"We homeschool her, or worldschool her, I like to say," said Gabriela. "We move a lot."

"Where have you guys lived?" Amina asked.

"All over," said Gabriela with an expansive wave of her hand.

"So will you guys be moving soon?" Amina asked with a faint note of unease.

Gabriela squinted at something in the distance. "Well, we'll be here for a while," she said, somewhat coyly, and then followed more directly, "We like being here."

Gabriela's words were meant to placate Amina, as if the woman could sense Amina's anxiety at the thought of losing a friend she hadn't even fully made yet.

"So what is your work, Amina?" Gabriela asked.

It was an odd way to ask about her profession, but Amina liked it for its assertion of productivity.

“I’m a writer,” Amina said. Saying those words always made her feel just a little bit taller. But then she shrank. “Well, I was a writer. I’m...doing other things right now.”

Gabriela threw her head back and laughed a rich, hearty laugh that surprised Amina.

“Oh, aren’t we always doing other things instead of the things we really want—really need—to do,” Gabriela said. She shook her head and cast a knowing look to the sky, as if she were communicating with something up there that knew exactly what she was talking about.

“My mother used to always tell me to stop dreaming,” she continued. “She said women with dreams always have problems. But I told her, ‘Mami, all women have dreams. They’re just too busy doing other things to do anything about them.’”

Amina chewed on Gabriela’s words for a minute, nodding slightly, then said, “Your mom is right though. Sometimes it’s easier to not try, to tuck those dreams away and...” Amina faltered, unsure how to finish that sentence.

“Do other things?” Gabriela suggested, a playful smirk on her face.

Amina laughed. “Okay, okay,” she said, putting her hand up. “You got me.”

“See?” Gabriela said, leaning forward, her long hair falling like a curtain over her arms. “It’s a circle. You get sucked in, going around and around. And you know the worst thing about it? You never get anything done!” Her voice thundered out into the quiet air. She shrugged and lowered her voice. “And then what are you going to say?” She raised her eyebrows at Amina.

Amina pursed her lips, not wanting to answer Gabriela. At that moment Luz walked over and stood above them, her face placid. They both turned to look at her. Two daisy

crowns hung from her wrist. Not speaking, she took the first one and placed it on her mother's head, then bowed. Then she turned to Amina.

“For me?” Amina asked.

Luz nodded. She laid the other crown on Amina's head, then bowed again. She stepped back, looked Amina in the eyes, then giggled. She pointed at Amina's headscarf and said, “Now you have two crowns.” She turned and ran across the yard to the raised garden bed, barren of vegetation, and stepped up, her arms stretched out, trying to walk across the small plank of wood without falling.

A never-used door in Amina's mind creaked open as she watched Luz. Wondering crept in uninvited, questioning what her child might have been like at Luz's age, what precocious things he might have said, what games he might have invented to entertain himself. Then Gabriela announced that they had to leave and the pinch of intrusive light was mercifully snuffed out. Amina offered to make them lunch, she wanted them to stay, but Gabriela said no without giving a reason why.

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Amina and Khalid's knuckles brushed against each other's as they walked down their street, but neither reached for the other's hand. Khalid had gotten off work earlier than usual and suggested an evening stroll, but he was sullen, and walked at a brisk pace, leaving Amina to chatter breathlessly in an attempt to fill the space between them. At some point in her ramble,

Gabriela's name slipped out and Amina stopped short, wondering how she could explain her strange friend without it sounding too bizarre, but when she looked at Khalid, who was now a few steps ahead of her, she realized from the way he squinted into the distance that he hadn't been listening to her.

"Why did you even want to go for a walk?" she grumbled to herself.

Khalid stopped abruptly, causing Amina to step back unsteadily to avoid bumping into him. He turned around to face her.

"Finish the question," he said, his face hard.

"What?" Amina asked, confused.

"You were going to say, 'if I didn't want to talk' right?"

Amina shrugged, knowing where the conversation was going.

"I'm not the one who doesn't want to talk. I'm not the one talking around what we need to talk about," he said.

Amina shuffled her feet, wishing she could run away. The tingle of tears prickled her eyes, much like the tingle in her breasts before the rush of milk she'd felt, punishingly, after the stillbirth.

"We had a baby, Amina," he started.

"No." She was angry now, her voice booming, but she didn't care. "No, we didn't have a baby. Baby's cry and breathe. He was dead before he came out of me."

Her heart was hammering in her chest. Her breath came ragged. She felt like she would explode. Khalid held her forearms gently. He crouched down to look at her face, though she avoided his eyes.

"We had a baby. His name was Noor," he whispered.

Amina grimaced, turning away from her husband's face. His hands moved down to her wrists. He held them between his fingers like he was taking her pulse.

“He was alive, Amina. He lived.”

She had a memory of Khalid taking her out for lunch at an expensive restaurant after the fourth month prenatal checkup. The fourth month was when Allah breathed the ruh, the divine spirit, into the baby, signifying the unborn child now held a soul. They'd celebrated the occasion, indulging in chargrilled oysters and rich, creamy eggplant pasta, not knowing the next month's visit would bring unbearable heartbreak.

Khalid pressed her delicate wrists between his fingers, then let go. He stepped around her and walked back towards their house, leaving her standing alone on the pavement, feeling utterly broken.

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Gabriela and Luz's visits became a regular occurrence. Amina grew to anticipate them the way she used to anticipate writing. She no longer made the faithful but fruitless trek to her office every morning. Instead, she bought board games and craft supplies that she thought would interest Luz. She prepared snacks and set out bottles of juice and tea, but Gabriela and Luz never ate or drank anything. Amina noticed, but decided not to care.

Her relationship with Khalid had devolved further since the evening he brought up the baby. They barely spoke anymore. Khalid took on more projects at work that kept him at the

office later, and spent more time in his study when he was home. He had an old futon in there, a relic from his college days. Amina had spied him sleeping there early one morning when she woke up to pray fajr. They didn't pray together anymore either, something they had both promised they would never make a habit.

Gabriela didn't know anything about that. With Gabriela, Amina could forget Khalid and her trauma, could shrug off her dead manuscript. She could be what she wasn't—carefree and happy—for a few hours out of the day. Despite the tenuous state of her marriage, Amina convinced herself that they could go on like this indefinitely, she and Khalid orbiting silently around each other, filling her emptiness with Gabriela and Luz, or at least keeping it at bay with their daily presence.

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“It looks like rain is coming,” Amina said, looking up at the muted blue sky.

Gabriela tilted her head up and sniffed the air. “Not yet,” she said.

Gabriela was quiet that morning. Absent of its usual smile, her face revealed faint wrinkles that started at the corners of her eyes and spread out across her cheeks down to her jawline, making her look much older. This change in Gabriela's appearance unsettled Amina.

They sat in old fold-up chairs Amina had found in the garage. The fabric seats sank them low into the earth. Sunlight trickled through the gathering gray clouds, too feeble to provide warmth. Luz sat under the sycamore tree, engrossed in a Nancy Drew mystery

perched on her knees. Amina stifled a yawn into the cowl of her oatmeal-colored sweater. She fixed her gaze on a spot in the grass and fell into something like sleep with her eyes open until she was jolted out of her stupor by a squeal from Luz, who dropped her book and ran across the yard, jumping up on the garden bed.

“Mira!” she shouted, pointing at something in the sky behind them.

Amina and Gabriela turned awkwardly in their sunken chairs at the same time.

“Oh!” gasped Gabriela, her smile returned.

In the distance they spotted a rainbow, hazy but its seven colored arches distinct. Amina smiled. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a rainbow.

“It must have rained over there,” she mused, more so to herself, though Gabriela nodded with a satisfied grin.

Amina laughed as Luz did cartwheels across the grass back to her book. A wash of bold sun came out, sweeping away the clouds. Amina looked over at Gabriela, expecting to share a laugh with her. Gabriela’s face was streaked with tears.

“Hey,” Amina said, concerned.

Gabriela ducked her head, a private smile still dancing on her lips. She let the tears dry on her face. She laughed lightly and shook her head.

“Luz isn’t my first child. I had a baby before her, but he died.” She was still smiling though her voice took on a grave tone. “That’s why I call her my rainbow. I was so angry for a long time. So angry.” She spread her hands out wide, as if to show the mass of her anger. “All I could think about was what I lost—and it was my loss, always mine, *only* mine.”

She sighed and shook her head again, then spoke. “Luz came after all that rain. But I had to heal first. I thought I had to accept his loss, but really, that wasn’t it. I had to accept



his presence in my life, always, forever, just not in the way I thought he would be present.”

She tapped her heart with two fingers. “He’s right here.”

She turned to Amina. Amina knew she couldn’t look away.

“If you keep looking for him, you will find him,” she said. “He’s waiting for you to find him.”

Amina stared at Gabriela, her eyes wild.

“What are you?” she said.

Gabriela opened her mouth to speak but Amina put her hand up to stop her.

“I think—I think you should leave. And I don’t think you should come back here.”

Gabriela nodded slowly, like she had been expecting those words. She stood up and walked over to Luz, who stood beneath the tree clutching her book, looking fearfully at Amina. Amina stood but didn’t move. Gabriela turned back.

“Goodbye, Amina,” she said.

Amina watched them leave. The returned sun poured its warmth on her back, but still she shivered.

\*\*\*

Rolls of thunder shook the windowpanes the next morning, waking Amina from a dreamless sleep. She put on rain boots and a coat and went outside. Standing before the sycamore tree, she held her hands out like she was making duaa, rain pooling in her palms and then sliding

down her arms. She raised her face towards the sky, enjoying the sting of the raindrops. The verse from Surah Luqman came to her. *It is He who sends down rain, and He who knows what is in the wombs.*

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The rain poured for three days straight, and on the fourth day when the sun came back, Amina went outside. She didn't expect Gabriela and Luz to be there, but she lingered beneath the sycamore for a while, breathing in the air, still cool and clean from the rain.

She went inside and headed upstairs. She stepped slowly past her office to a door at the end of the hall. She hadn't entered this room in almost a year, not since the morning of her fifth month checkup. It still smelled faintly of paint. Khalid had painted the top half of the walls light blue, the bottom a creamy white. Amina had chosen rainbow wallpaper to wrap around the middle of the walls where the blue and white met. She remembered the spot in the right corner where her hand had slipped, leaving a wrinkle in the paper. Khalid had quelled her anxiety over the wrinkle by placing a plush armchair, reupholstered in white chintz striped with periwinkle satin, in front of it.

Perched on the small table next to the chair was a silver framed photo of Amina and Khalid standing under the sycamore tree after the fourth month checkup, big smiles on their faces, Amina in a long yellow sundress, Khalid's protective hand on the small mound of her belly. Amina sat down hesitantly on the edge of the chair, resisting its comfort. The chair and

table were the only pieces of furniture in the room. Amina rubbed her hands up and down her thighs and rocked back and forth, trying to control her breathing, grief building inside of her like a storm gathering force. She rocked and rocked and waited for it to begin.

## Under the Blue Tent

Fouad opened the chamber of the gun and set it on the dresser, staring at the empty slots. His hand moved to the three scars on his left forearm, four inches long and two inches thick with scar tissue, just below the inside of his elbow. He didn't cut himself anymore, but touching the scar brought comfort, a reminder that he could release the demons inside him. He picked up the gun and loaded it with six bullets. He only needed one to do the job, but this way was easier. No risk of mistakes. He was going to end his life. But first, he had to take his son to the circus.

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He'd found the advertisement a few days ago, the same day he decided to kill himself. His mailbox had been stuffed with coupon catalogues. He was about to toss the bundle into the garbage when a small, waxy slip of paper fell at his feet. *Blue Tent Circus*, the flyer read, *Fun, Adventure, and Excitement Awaits Under the Blue Tent.*

Fouad hadn't planned to see his son, Samir, before he killed himself. He and his ex-wife, Maritza, had an informal agreement that allowed him two weekends a month with his son. He skipped out on most of his weekends though, claiming he had a plumbing gig, even long after his license had been revoked, when really he was nursing a hangover or gearing up for a bender.

He wanted to see Samir, but he didn't want Samir to see him. He knew he couldn't be around his son when he was drunk, but sober wasn't good either. Sober, he couldn't control his thoughts, which spun like a demonic dervish from angry to sad to afraid to anxious. Sadness made him angry, his anger frightened him, fear made him nervous. It was a spiral, ever tightening. Only alcohol could loosen it, just a little, just for a little while. He knew it was best for Samir that he wasn't around.

But looking at the circus ticket, Fouad had an idea, no, more than that, a vision. A black screen in Fouad's mind blinked to life, brightening to a moving picture. He saw himself and Samir at the circus. Samir's eyes lighting up watching the elephants and tigers perform tricks, Samir jumping up and down and clapping when Fouad won him prizes at the game booths, Samir looking up at him with a beaming smile at the end of the day, hugging him and thanking him again and again. The vision shifted to an adult Samir finding his tattered circus ticket in an old keepsake box and showing it to his children, telling his kids about the grandfather they'd never met, a troubled man but a man who had tried, who had given Samir the best day of his life.

Fouad had surged with renewed energy. He could do that. It would take all the mental strength he could gather, but he could do that, he could stay sober for a couple of hours and be a good dad for once. He could leave his son with a good memory of him, then go home and put a bullet in his head and finally shatter the spiral.

Before anxiety could sweep in and shred the vision, he called Maritza and asked if he could take Samir. He wasn't sure if it was his weekend or not, but she said yes. Rather than pleasing him, her quick acceptance only made him angry. Just once he wished she'd curse him out like he deserved, call him a no-good drunk, a complete fuck-up of a husband and

father, but no, she was patient with him, blandly and indifferently patient with him, just as she always was.

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On a Saturday afternoon, Fouad pulled up in front of the house that used to be his. His mouth filled with saliva. Nausea simmered in his gut. He ran his fingers over the scars on his arm, pressing gently, forcing himself to breathe deeply. The house had been a faded, peeling white when he and Maritza bought it. He'd never gotten around to painting it, like Maritza had asked repeatedly, but now it was a creamy peach sorbet with a Caribbean blue trim. A cobblestone walkway wended a path to the front door. Daisies and violets hung from baskets above the porch. A wooden bench sat in a corner of the yard, slightly concealed by newly-planted, fruit-bearing trees. It looked nothing like the house Fouad remembered; it had become a home.

The side of the driveway that had been Fouad's sat empty. Ben, the new husband, the one who'd painted the house and paved the walkway and planted the trees, was out, probably getting groceries or buying tools for the next home improvement project. Ben had blue eyes, freckles, and a jolly beard the color of rust, and he was always fixing things.

Maritza answered at his knock. Her face was serene and unsmiling, her dark hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. She wore a long black skirt and a loose white tunic. Fouad

remembered a time when she'd worn miniskirts and lacy low-cut tops, her hair spilling down in waves to her waist like a mermaid.

They had been wild together, slamming shots of tequila at bars and sneaking into dirty alleyways when they could no longer control themselves. Fouad thought they'd been escaping life together, reveling in being unmoored, but it turned out Maritza wasn't running away, no, she was waiting to be found. Pregnant with Samir, she became curious about the book in a strange script Fouad kept in a dresser drawer, never opened, asked him to read something from it, and fell in love with the words. She'd gulped the holy text like a dying fish returned to water and never even glanced back at the land she'd left behind.

They'd stayed together for a while after Maritza converted. She'd been patient, even teasing, trying to persuade him to pray with her, to go to the masjid with her. Then she began to sigh whenever Fouad reached for a bottle, and though he took his bottles and skulked out to the backyard, her sighs carried out into the dark, until the night when Maritza stood at the back door, balancing Samir on her hip, and told Fouad she couldn't live like this anymore. They divorced and she met and married Ben, a new convert like herself, just before Samir's second birthday, when he was still young enough to adapt seamlessly to the new life Maritza shaped for them. Studying Maritza's bare, smooth face, Fouad realized he had never really known her.

"Samir," she called over her shoulder. "Your dad is here." She turned back to Fouad. "How are you?" she asked.

"Hanging in there. You?"

"Alhamdulillah."

"Right."

Without trying to, she crushed him, reminding him of where he came from. Here in America, with his cinnamon-hued skin and hair that rolled into tight curls if he didn't cut it every other week, people thought he was black. And it was easier to let people think that, since they couldn't say or spell Mauritania, let alone find it on a map. He'd learned to say his parents were from Africa when asked about his "odd" name, learned to just keep it as uncomplicated as possible. He could almost forget about all that made him foreign, until Maritza brought him back.

The sound of Samir's footsteps galloping down the stairs triggered the spiral inside of Fouad to tighten. He hadn't seen his son in months. His hands trembled. Sweat popped out of his pores. He felt cold and hot at the same time. He chided himself to stay in control. Samir appeared at Maritza's side, clutching a book to his chest. He was eight years old, all gangly arms and legs, his face a mirror image of his father's. He smiled shyly at Fouad. The spiral loosened.

"Hey kiddo," Fouad said.

Samir stepped up to him, his free hand pulling at the hem of his T-shirt. Fouad lifted his hand to shake his son's at the same time the boy leaned in. They did an awkward dance, jerking back and forth, before settling into a stiff, one-armed hug. Fouad thumped him on the back once for good measure.

"You ready to go to the circus?" Fouad asked.

Samir squinted down at his shoes, scuffing them on the welcome mat. He pressed at the spine of his book. "I don't know if I like the circus."

Fouad's fingers began to tingle. The fist in his stomach clenched. Samir was supposed to be excited. There was nothing in Fouad's plans for if Samir wasn't excited about the



circus. Already the vision was losing luster, the edges darkening and curling. He felt Maritza's eyes on him, measuring him. He shook his head, forcing the demon out. The picture brightened, the edges uncurled.

“Well, here's your chance to find out,” he said.

Samir's eyes widened. “Like a science experiment?” he asked.

“Yep. Exactly.”

“Okay,” Samir nodded.

Samir turned back to his mother and dug his head into the center of her chest. She pulled his face into her hands and kissed his cheeks and forehead then hugged him, whispering prayers over his head.

Fouad's mother had been the same way with him and his siblings, never letting them leave the house, not even to play outside, without praying for them. Fouad remembered her as a sad, anxious mother, out of place in America and nostalgic for home, prone to weeping and long spells at the window. She held tightly to her cultural and religious identity. The prideful tilt of her chin as she wrapped her hijab in front of the mirror, the ease in her gait as she walked the streets of their small Connecticut town in her traditional clothes, oblivious to the stares she received. Prayer and fasting held her steady. She had a place she could call home, on Earth and in the spiritual realm. Fouad had neither.

Maritza finally pulled away from Samir.

“Have a good time sweetheart,” she said, rubbing his head.

She looked up at Fouad. “Have him home by six, please.”

Fouad nodded. Maritza went inside and shut the door. Walking to his truck, Fouad knew she was watching them. He opened the door for Samir and waited till his seat belt was

fastened. Thankfully the engine cranked up without a hiccup. He eased the truck onto the street and drove slowly out of the neighborhood.

“Dad.”

“Yeah?”

“Who’s Fred J?”

“What?”

“The sign on the side of your truck. Who’s Fred J?”

“Oh, well, that’s me.”

He forgot Samir had never seen him in his work truck. Up till recently, he’d picked him up in the Mustang. He scratched the stubble on his cheek.

“It’s easier to get a plumbing job when your name is Fred J. and not Fouad Jabbar.”

He laughed and looked over at the boy but his face was solemn.

“So,” Samir asked slowly, “you lie about it?”

Fouad sputtered. “It’s not a lie, it’s just, you know, my name is different, so I changed it a little, just for work. Like a—like a nickname. You don’t get called Sammy or Sam at school?”

Samir shook his head. “No. Some kids try to, even some teachers, but I don’t let them. I tell them that is not my name.” He shrugged. “I like my name.”

“Yeah? That’s good,” Fouad said.

He slumped in his seat, feeling stupid. His own kid had more confidence at eight years old than he’d ever had in his whole life. Kids at school used to call him Food. “What’s up, Food?” they’d say, passing him in the hallways, stretching out the vowels so that it sounded like a cow mooing. In the cafeteria, “Hey Food, want some food?” Or Gum Wad.

That one had started in high school when a teacher, trying to pronounce his name correctly, had said, “Oh, Foo-wad, like a wad of gum.” The class had erupted in laughter, Fouad’s ears had burned. They were stupid jokes, stupid nicknames, but they’d brought on an anger so intense that Fouad had taken a kitchen knife and sliced into his arm just to release it.

Anger and shame twisted Fouad’s gut like a wet towel. The beginning of a headache thumped at the top of his head. There was a flask of whiskey in the glove compartment, but no, he couldn’t do that. He searched the distance in front of him, frantic. Golden arches loomed.

“You hungry?” he asked. “Want some McDonald’s?”

“Mommy says we can’t eat there. She says the meat’s not halal.”

Fouad stifled a sigh. “Alright, how about some fries at least? A coke? A milkshake?”

Samir grinned. “Milkshake,” he whispered.

“Good deal, my man.” Fouad extended his fist and Samir bumped it with his own, then giggled.

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Fouad and Samir sat in a corner booth at the back of the restaurant. Samir gripped his chocolate milkshake with both hands sipping it steadily, his eyes flitting around the restaurant and out the window and never landing on Fouad.

“You enjoying that milkshake?” Fouad asked.

Samir nodded, still not looking at him.

Fouad picked at his fries, his burger with only one small bite taken. His appetite, always erratic, had slowed even more recently.

Samir slurped up the last of his milkshake with a loud gurgle. A group of old men a few tables away chuckled, grinning at Samir and then Fouad, their smiles tender and knowing. A rush of joy flooded Fouad. He saw himself through the men's eyes, a father taking his son out to lunch, a father and son sharing a simple, special moment. He picked up his burger and took a big bite. He chewed slowly, savoring the crunchy tang of the pickle against the sweetness of the ketchup. He smiled to himself and took a few more bites, relishing this unexpected hunger.

Samir put his empty cup down and laid his hands in his lap. Fouad pushed his box of fries towards Samir. He slid one out and frowned at it.

“Daddy, how come you never take me to your house?”

The food in Fouad's mouth turned rotten. He wanted to spit it out. He wiped his greasy, salted fingers on a napkin and balled it in his fist, rolling it between his palms. Fouad didn't have a house or even an apartment, just a room he rented from some stone-faced Honduran guys who eyed him with suspicion whenever he was around and never spoke to him. He had a tiny bedroom with one sad window just below the ceiling that offered only feeble light. He kept it clean, but with the cracks in the walls and the dingy brown carpet, there was nothing he could do to stop it from looking like a prison cell.

“Ah my place is a sh—, it's not a good place for a kid. Too small.”

“Ben says our house is too small, too. He says we should get another house before the baby comes, some place with a nice backyard.”

Fouad dropped his head. He gripped his seat and dug his nails into the vinyl cushion, wishing it were his own flesh. He knew one day this would happen, that Maritza and Ben would want to have kids of their own, but that didn't stop him from feeling like he'd been hit by a truck. His fingers found the scars and jabbed at them, the scar tissue too thick to break through without something sharp. He caught Samir looking at the scars and covered them with his hand.

Fouad cleared his throat. "So your mom's having a baby, huh?" He tried to smile, but it felt more like a wince.

"Yeah, I can't wait." Samir smiled dreamily. "I hope I get a little brother." He paused in his chewing. "Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

Fouad looked into the well of his son's eyes. He had a brother and a sister. A mother and a father. He was the youngest. The last he'd talked to any of them, they were all still in Connecticut, but that was years ago, almost two decades really. That was the truth, but so was the fact that leaving them and clearing his tracks was probably the one good thing he'd ever done for them.

"No," he answered. "Just me."

He watched Samir eat the fries, one after the other, his jaw bobbing up and down. He would leave a note with their names and addresses. They would find Samir, or maybe he would find them. That could be one other good thing he'd done, something to weigh out the bad.

Fouad grabbed a napkin and wiped at the grease and ketchup smeared on Samir's cheek. "Alright buddy, ready to see some lions, and tigers, and bears?"

Samir's eyes grew wide. "They have bears?"

“Maybe.”

“Let’s go!”

Samir hopped out of his seat, the sugar from the milkshake working its giddy magic.

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The flyer said the circus was at the arena near the lake. As they got closer, Fouad scanned the horizon for a big blue tent.

“There it is. I see it,” Samir said, pointing.

There it was. A big blue tent the same color as the cloudless sky, with a gold trim that stretched across the field. It was impressive.

Fouad parked the car, and they walked across the lot as the afternoon sun beat down on them. Despite the grand appearance of the tent, it was quiet; the crunch of gravel underneath their feet the only sound. There weren’t many cars and no people milling around. They walked around to the back of the tent and found a teenager dozing in a fold-up chair, a tan baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. Fouad had to clear his throat to get the young man’s attention. The attendant mumbled the price and slid two tickets across the table without Fouad ever seeing his face.

Inside the tent it was cool, thanks to the large fans whirring in the corner, rippling the blue cloth and giving the impression of being underwater. There were stands set up around the perimeter, selling food and offering games and rides, and a petting zoo with goats and sheep; a boy wearing a plastic firefighter’s hat sat on a brown pony walking in slow circles,

its head bowed. At the far end of the tent, a magician did card tricks for a handful of kids. There was some action everywhere Fouad looked, but it was all muted, like he was watching television with the sound off.

The quiet jarred him. He'd expected noise and activity. He functioned better in chaotic spaces. Here he felt exposed. He wiped the sweat that had collected on the back of his neck. A teenage girl walked by carrying a bag of trash.

"Excuse me," he asked, "where's the clowns and the elephants? You know, the circus stuff?"

"The show starts at four o'clock," she said, without slowing her pace.

Fouad checked his watch. It wasn't yet three o'clock.

"How about we walk around for a bit?" he asked Samir. "What do you want to do?"

Samir looked around doubtfully, then sauntered over to the petting zoo. Fouad stood outside the fenced area and watched Samir kneel next to a sheep in repose, his fingers dancing over the animal's woolly fur. After a few timid pats, he leaned in to the sheep and began to stroke its back. When the animal tipped its head back towards Samir, a silent request for a head rub, Samir looked over at Fouad and grinned, his eyes electric. Fouad was struck by how much the boy looked like Fouad's own mother.

Fouad's parents and siblings would be thrilled to learn of the boy's existence. Samir could make up for the disappointment Fouad had brought. His family tried hard to break through whatever was holding him, gently suggesting therapy and prayer, but he shut them out. Worn out of their pleading, worried eyes, he packed his things and left in the middle of the night. He drifted from place to place, picking up odd jobs here and there. Eventually he ended up down South, as far away from them as he could get without falling into the water.

In the brief euphoria following Samir's birth, Fouad had committed to getting sober and reuniting with his family, but eventually the spiral pulled him back down to the bottom of the bottle. Samir would fit in well with them in all the ways Fouad never could.

Samir stood and walked back to his father. The sheep he'd been petting had fallen asleep.

"Want to play some games?" Fouad asked, gesturing towards the stands.

"What kind of games?"

"I don't know. Let's go see."

They stopped at all the game booths. Samir did several rounds of balloon shoot, trying to pop a balloon with a dart, but was unsuccessful. The woman working the booth gave him a lollipop anyway, which he pocketed. Maritza would likely check the ingredients before allowing Samir to eat it. He played ping pong toss and duck pond, aiming a fishing rod into a bucket of water to hook a duck. He threw cabbages at a wooden clown's wide-open mouth, laughing when they hit the clown's head, which they did every time. He seemed unbothered that he lost every game until they got to the ring toss. Behind the table of long-necked glass bottles stood a wall of toys: stuffed animals, plastic airplanes, foam finger shooters, and deflated beach balloons. After his third try, he stomped his foot.

"What's the matter kiddo?" Fouad asked.

Samir pointed at the toy wall.

"What?"

"The loggerhead sea turtle. I really want the loggerhead sea turtle."

Right in the center of all the garishly colored toys sat a subdued stuffed turtle.

"How do you know it's a loggerhead?" Fouad asked.



“Because it’s brown and red on top and yellow on the sides. Loggerheads can weigh up to a thousand pounds, and they travel the whole world, farther than any other sea turtle.” He held his hands out in front of him with his fingers splayed like he was waiting to catch a ball. His voice was awestruck.

Fouad smiled. His vision flickered to life. Adult Samir holding the ratty stuffed turtle, telling his kids how his dad won it for him. He handed a dollar to the red-faced man running the booth and picked up a stack of rings.

“Let me see what I can do,” he said, pretending to roll up his sleeves.

Samir bounced on his toes and clapped. “Yay, Daddy,” he said.

Fouad threw a ring and it bounced off a bottle onto the floor. He shook off the loss.

“I’m a little rusty,” he said. Samir laughed.

He tossed another and again it bounced. “Huh,” he grunted.

He missed the third toss then paid for another round. He missed all three. He was sweating now and his jaw hurt from clenching his teeth. The spiral was tightening. He should walk away, but he couldn’t. He had to win the turtle. His legacy depended on it. He played three more rounds and missed them all.

“Come on pal, let somebody else have a turn,” the red-faced man said after he’d picked up the fallen rings.

There were two kids standing behind them in line. A third stood off to the side, watching. Fouad threw down another dollar. The man scowled but laid down the rings. Again, Fouad lost.

“This game is rigged,” Fouad said.

The man laughed. “It’s fair,” he said. “You just can’t throw.”

Fouad's mouth tightened.

"It's okay, Dad," Samir said.

"No, you're getting your turtle."

Fouad set down another dollar on the table. The man looked at it but didn't move to pick it up.

"You should listen to your kid," he mumbled.

"And you should shut your mouth," Fouad growled. His hands shook. A humming like a swarm of bees buzzed in his head.

"Alright pal, move along. You're done here."

"No, I'm a paying customer. Give me the rings." He was shouting now.

"I said move along." The man motioned to the child standing behind Samir. "Come on kid, your turn."

"No, I'm not done yet," Fouad screamed. He slammed his fist on the table. The man ignored him, taking the child's money. "No," Fouad said. He hopped over the table and made for the toy wall.

"Hey buddy, what the hell are you doing? You can't do that," the man shouted.

Fouad snatched the turtle off the wall and threw it to Samir, who didn't move to catch it. "Hey kids, don't waste your money, here." He grabbed toys in clusters and threw them over the table onto the ground. A few other kids ran over and plucked them up. The adults around stared, their mouths open in horror, but one man laughed and gave Fouad a thumbs up.

"You. Get outta here," the red-faced man pointed at Fouad. "I'm calling security."

“Yeah who’s that? The kid sleeping outside. Don’t worry, I’ll wake him up on my way out.” Fouad stalked out of the tent with Samir jogging behind him.

Fouad climbed in the truck and slammed his door. His breath came in ragged heaves. He opened the glove compartment and stared hard at the flask of whiskey, then slammed the door shut. Samir jumped and slid back in his seat. The turtle lay limp on the seat between them. Fouad tried to put the key in the ignition but his hands were too shaky. He dropped the keys in his lap and laid his head on the hot steering wheel. Leave it to Fouad to screw up what was supposed to be his last good moment with his son. Before he could catch himself, he was crying.

“I’m sorry, son. I’m sorry,” he wept.

He sat like that, his head on the steering wheel, long after his tears stopped, embarrassed and afraid to move. He felt a hand on his back between his shoulder blades. Samir had slid next to him and laid his head on his shoulder. Fouad sat up but kept his head bowed.

“I’m sorry, son. I’m—” He squeezed his eyes shut against a fresh pool of tears. “I’m not good, son. I mean, I have a problem. I’m not well.”

Samir laid a finger on the scars on Fouad’s arm. “Is this part of that problem?” he asked.

Fouad bobbed his head slowly. “Yeah, it—it helps for the pain,” he whispered.

Samir rubbed his fingertips across the scars, then covered them with his hand. He didn’t tell Fouad it was okay, that everything was going to be okay, he just held him. Fouad wiped his eyes with the heel of his palms, overcome with fatigue.

“I should get you home,” he said, starting up the truck.

Left took them out of the arena, but Fouad turned right towards the lake instead. He crested a small hill and a panorama of water appeared, stretched across the horizon. Samir sat up.

“Oh,” he said.

“You’ve been here before, right?” Fouad asked.

“No, never.”

“Really? Your mom never took you?”

Samir shook his head, his eyes on the water.

“You wanna check it out?” he asked.

“Can we?” Samir said.

Fouad parked and they walked over to the waterfront. From the top of the steps at the edge of the lake they watched the water curl lazily along the shore. In the distance, a speedboat zipped across the lake. Seagulls floated down, their bellies skimming the water, causing it to ripple. Fouad breathed in the thick, humid air; closed his eyes against the mist that sprinkled his face when the waves came in. Samir tilted his face up to the sky, pointed, and laughed.

“We’re still under the blue tent,” he said.

“What?”

“The blue tent. Allah’s blue tent.”

Fouad studied the sky. Out there by the water, the sun washing his face, there was no spiral, and no vision either. He felt open, not outside of himself but comfortably within, not squeezed. He wondered, in all the times his thoughts had spun in endless circles, tossing around and crashing into each other, snatching him into their tightening whirls, why he had

never thought to step outside. He laid his hand on top of his son's head and rubbed his hair, the thick coils bumpy beneath his fingers like its own form of braille. Suddenly, a fish jumped out of the water then fell back into the depths. Samir gasped.

“Daddy did you see that?” he shrieked. Fouad laughed. “Look, look, it did it again!”

The fish jumped a third time, but before it could fall back into the water, a gull swooped down and scooped it into its beak. Samir squealed. “Oh, Daddy did you see that?”

“Yeah, son, I saw it.”

They sat and watched the water, not talking.

“You ever been fishing?” Fouad asked after a while.

“No.”

Fouad thought of the loaded gun waiting for him on his dresser. His voice trembled. “Maybe—maybe I could take you fishing sometime.”

Samir smiled at him. “I think I'd like to go fishing.”

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Fouad dropped Samir off and headed home. He unlaced his boots and emptied his pockets onto the dresser. He picked up the gun and opened the chamber, shaking the bullets into his open palm, then slipped them back into their slots. Six bullets, one for each person in his life he'd hurt. He held the last one in his hand. One left, one not yet broken. He laid the gun back onto the dresser, the chamber gaping open, and placed the sixth bullet next to it. He might

still do it. That last bullet might be the one that ended him. But first, he had to take his son fishing.

## Apples and Oranges

I knew something was up when I opened the front door and found my wife May standing just a few steps away from the threshold clutching a pale blue shawl over her bare arms, her face drawn and pale. Usually by the time I came home she was in a frenzy of activity, whirling through the kitchen, or elbow deep in dirt in the garden, always startled by my appearance. “Is it six o’clock already?” she’d say, eyes wide and face flushed, giving me a quick kiss before turning back to her task.

Before I could even fully gather her presence at the door and greet her with a proper salaams, she had lifted my bag off my shoulder and set it down on the floor and was pulling me towards the living room. I tripped on the carpet trying to slip my brown leather loafers off and couldn’t believe she didn’t notice I still had them on. Shoes on the carpet was anathema for May, she even kept a little basket of disposable paper slippers for when delivery guys or repairmen had to come to the house. I had a brief, delicious fantasy that she was going to throw me on the couch and jump on top of me and announce she was pregnant. Then she sat me down on the couch and took my hand and I immediately thought she was going to tell me she had made a mistake and she didn’t really love me and she wanted a divorce. What can I say, we’d only been married ten months, and I was an insecure man.

“Dr. Ferris called me this morning,” she said.

My brain started running like a hamster trying to remember who Dr. Ferris was. Her thesis director? Her favorite linguistics professor, the really old guy with the Santa Claus

beard and Velcro-strapped shoes? Or that Victorian literature professor she couldn't stand who'd asked her what her "first language" was?

"Actually it was her nurse, Jane," said May.

Okay so it was a *doctor* doctor. It was then I noticed May wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were fixed on a spot on her left knee. I had trouble swallowing. She squeezed her eyes shut and spoke.

"There's something I've been keeping from you, Na'eem. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry, but now I know and the thing is they found cancer in my ovaries."

Everyone says when they hear bad news it feels like a punch in the guts, but for me it felt like a fist to the center of my head that then traveled through my brain, down my throat, and slammed down on my bladder. I thought for sure I had pissed the couch. A cloud of blinding white light moved over my eyes. I had to blink several times before I could look at May, who sat with her hands folded in her lap like she was waiting to be served tea. She finally looked at me.

"I'm sorry," she said in a quiet, even voice.

I leaned in to hold her, to tell her she had nothing to be sorry for, that we'd get through this together, but she held her hand up to stop me.

"There's more," she said.

I didn't want more. I wanted to put a hand over her mouth, to pull down the shades on this whole scene and curl into a ball until it all, her words, that whole moment in time, dissolved into vapor. I rested the arms May had refused in the space between us, burying my fists in the sofa cushions, and waited for her to finish.



“It’s pretty advanced. It’s already spread to both ovaries and into my abdomen. I didn’t have any symptoms. My stomach was a little puffy but I thought I had just been eating too much bread. When I missed my period I thought I was pregnant but then the test was negative so that’s why I went to see Dr. Ferris in the first place.”

We sat in our silence for a while. Then I slid closer to her, and she finally let me hold her. She laid her head on my shoulder and said, “It’s okay though. I think it’s going to be okay. We’re going to start chemotherapy. Dr. Ferris says there’s still a chance we can fight it. Insha’Allah.”

I said nothing.

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That night, after May had gone to bed, I went downstairs to the prayer room May had created. It was a little nook next to the living room, meant to be a sitting room or an office. May had painted the walls a pearlescent white and had plush, dark blue—sapphire, she called it—carpet installed. She’d hung a few tasteful calligraphy prints, Allah, the Prophet, and the Ayat al-Kursi in gold, and a black-and-white panorama of the Kaabah during Hajj, the swell of believers doing tawaf melting into each other like the rings of Saturn orbiting around its base. I didn’t spend much time in there, and it was a shame I then thought, because it was a peaceful room. I only prayed when May asked me to, in her gentle pleading. “Your recitation is so beautiful though,” she’d say. All those years of disuse, yet when I cleared the cobwebs

out of my throat, the words still rolled out evenly. I pulled one of the rugs out from the basket where May kept them and laid it out. I knelt down and pressed my forehead into the rug. This was the position of sajdah, full humility and submission, the posture of the seeker. I waited, but the only word that came to me was ‘please.’ Please, please, please, please. I waited to feel something, to feel heard, but all I felt was alone.

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Flowers. That was all I saw when I first walked into the grocery store the next morning. Roses, red, pink, yellow, purple—I didn’t know roses could be purple—tulips, orchids, daisies, and huge potted plants that seemed to reach out towards each other with their thick, waxy green leaves. I would have thought I was in a forest if not for the shiny Mylar balloons announcing birthdays, weddings, and graduations that floated around amid the hanging ferns. My eyes bounced around to the signs hung above the aisles, trying to figure out where to start. Then I remembered May’s list that I’d stuck in my shirt pocket. I pulled it out and scanned up to the first item: fruit.

Everything else on the list was quite specific, with brand names written in hurried script next to several items—a last minute adjustment with the knowledge that I would be going, I was sure. But next to fruit? Nothing.

When I think fruit, I think apples and oranges, maybe bananas if I'm feeling exotic, but not May. She's crazy about fruits and vegetables. She calls the produce section her "happy place." She comes home with all these weird and sometimes god-awful ugly things covered in fuzz and stringy hairs. One time she brought home something I thought was a red onion but it turned out to be a pomegranate. She offered me one and when I went to take a bite she started laughing.

"No, not like that," she said, then placed it on the cutting board and sliced into it with a sharp knife. She scooped out the little seeds that glistened like rubies and held them out to me in her palm.

"You eat the seeds?" I asked.

"The seeds are the fruit," she said.

It was as disappointing as getting a huge wrapped box on your birthday and digging through an ocean of tissue paper just to find a pair of socks. I didn't tell her that though, I just smiled and swallowed the slimy things without tasting them while she went on about antioxidants and superfoods.

I pushed my way through the dark maze of foliage into the oasis of the produce section, all lit up with stands piled high with vegetables and fruits. The overhead lights beamed on the thick purple skins of the eggplants that towered over the zucchini and squash tucked in next to them. Rotund tomatoes splayed out next to slender green beans, their stems curling into themselves. I could see why May liked this part of the store so much. It felt almost tropical with the pineapples and mangoes carefully perched on top of barrels and inside crates. Or maybe that was because an instrumental of "The Girl from Ipanema" was playing on low volume over the speakers.

I tore off a bunch of bags and grabbed a few kiwis and dug through the mangoes until I found two that looked ripe. I skipped the papaya. They were green and besides, they smelled like feet. I spun the cart around to the other side. There were unripe plantains with tough, green skins, stumps of ginger that looked like arthritic hands, and something that looked like a skinny potato way past its expiration date. The sign said yucca root. I didn't know if it was a fruit or vegetable, but I bagged up three of them. May would find something to do with them in one of her cookbooks. She'd installed a bookcase in the kitchen that was overflowing with cookbooks she picked up at used bookstores and yard sales, or sometimes for free in the discarded book bin at the library.

May wasn't really a great cook—I think she thought every dish needed a little Italian seasoning, everything always tasted faintly of rosemary and oregano, even when she fried fish—but what she lacked in skill she made up for with enthusiasm. She'd get the radio going and run around the kitchen banging pots and spoons, muttering over sauce-spattered recipes and shimmying her hips to Latin jazz as she stirred. Sometimes I'd linger in the doorway and watch her and imagine wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in that forest of dark, curly hair that she kept in a low, loose ponytail that trailed to the middle of her back. On our wedding night she'd taken off her hijab and let that wild mass of hair down and it was like watching a peacock fan out its magnificent tail.

I never did any of the things I imagined doing with May. I fantasized about ecstatic exchanges, me lifting her up on the counter by her glorious hips or laying her down on the kitchen floor, rolling around in the dust of stray cumin and coriander spice from her latest cooking experiment. But if I did manage to emerge from my darkened corner, I could only curl a lock of her hair behind her ear and press my lips to her cheek, warm and flushed from

the heat of cooking steam. I wanted so much to get everything right this time with May that, truth be told, I was a little afraid of her.

May was my second chance. I'd been married before, briefly. My first wife, Rajah, was a friend of a distant cousin from my father's family, a North Sudanese student studying tropical medicine. After only three months of being married to me she declared me "boring" and said she wanted someone more fun. Our marriage was so brief we still qualified for an annulment, a fact that made my dissatisfied bride so happy she clapped when we stood in front of the clerk at City Hall. She erased me from her life like a smudge of kohl in the corner of her eye.

That couldn't happen again. I'd lost enough people. My dad when I was five, my mother right after I graduated high school. I had no siblings and Rajah didn't even give me a chance. I needed May. And not just to have someone in my life. It was her, with all her quirks and odd charms, the way she touched my hand when she talked, and pressed her nose to my cheek like she was sniffing my skin before she kissed me. It was her that I needed.

I looked down absently at the peach I held in my hand. I turned it around until I came across a dent in its skin. The tip of my thumb fit perfectly in the groove. I pressed down and a little juice pooled above my nail. I pressed down harder, my thumb sinking into the meaty pulp down to the firmer flesh below. I brought the gouged part to my mouth and took a bite. It was perfect, heavy with almost overripe sweetness with a bit of crunchy tang underneath.

I took another bite and tossed the peach into the top basket on the cart, not bothering with the plastic bag, and moved on to the plums. I grabbed one off the top that was hard and red and pressed my teeth into it. The bitter juice made my teeth stand up, but I swallowed down the tough meat anyway. I did the same with the apricots and pears, devouring half of a

star fruit in one bite. I had a pile of mutilated fruit in my basket and was reaching towards a basket of kumquats to grab a fistful when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned to find a guy in a black polo with a nametag clipped to the edge of the collar, his brows curled together in a deep V. Only then did I become aware of how I must look, a swarthy man with a beard that grazed my collarbone when I talked, no doubt looking like a creepy Taliban dude who'd gone jihad on the produce. My lips puckered from the fruit acids smeared around my mouth. I reached to wipe it with my hands, only to discover they were covered in slimy pulp.

The store worker gestured towards my cart.

“Bruh. You can't eat the fruit.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but I raised my hand to explain. I was going to tell him I had every intention to pay and show him the stickers I had peeled off the fruit and stuck to my hand, but instead I said, “It's okay, my wife is dying.”

He took a step back and rested his arms at his side. For a second I thought he was going to salute me. He shook his head slowly. “Damn, dude.”

“Yeah.”

I tried to laugh, but the air caught in my throat. He knocked my arm with his fist and walked away. I didn't know why I said that, but I knew in that moment it was true.

May knew my mother was dead, of course, but I had never given her any specifics. I remembered sitting at the kitchen table doing homework while my mom cooked dinner, watching her prod her abdomen with her fingers, the lines on her forehead creased in a fearful concern. Then I remembered how her stomach began to swell like it was carrying the

little brother or sister I had so badly wanted when I was younger. And then I remembered sitting in that empty kitchen feeling completely alone in the world.

I didn't tell May that. Just like I didn't tell her how much she meant to me, how much I loved her. How I studied her face in bed at night after she had fallen asleep and whispered to her eyelashes, "Maymuna, you are my moon." So much I didn't tell her.

I needed to get home to my wife. Groceries could wait. I pushed the cart aside, threw away all the half-eaten fruit, and made my way to the exit.

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By the time I pulled up in front of the house, I had a new resolve. My faith in Allah might be shaky, but my faith in May was solid. Dying did not mean death, dying meant you still had a chance at life. That's what May believed, and that's what I could believe too. She would get better. She would beat the cancer, and then we would begin.

I burst through the door and ran upstairs to our bedroom. It was empty, the bed neatly made. There were smooth, even lines in the carpet. She'd vacuumed. I walked through the house calling her name. The living room was spotless and smelled faintly of jasmine. In the kitchen, every surface gleamed, not even a grain of salt on the white tile countertops. I looked around for a note, praying I wouldn't find a Dear Na'eem letter. I stood in the center of the kitchen like a lost child. I walked over to the French doors that led to the backyard and released the breath I'd been holding. May sat on her heels in the grass, wrapped in the sun's

light. She was wearing the same blue shawl from yesterday, this time wrapped loosely over her hair. Her gray abaya billowed out around her.

I stepped outside and shut the door. I opened my mouth to call her name but stopped when she bent forward, pressing her hands and forehead to the earth. She was praying, not in the fumbling way I had attempted the night before, but really praying, her body moving like water. She sat back on her heels, her mouth moving silently. She turned her head slowly to the right, then the left, greeting the angels, then she turned back to look at me.

I started talking as I walked over to her, blabbering really. I reached my hand out to her and pulled her up. I held her hands in mine.

“May, you were right, I shouldn’t have doubted you. We can fight this.”

“Na’eem—”

She lifted her face to me. Her eyes were red. Streaks of salt stained her cheeks. Yesterday she’d looked confident, now she looked broken. I shook my head. I knew what she wanted to tell me.

“You’ll get the treatment and everything will be okay. And when you’re better, we’ll go somewhere, yeah? We’ll go to Sudan, huh, like you always wanted to. Find my relatives. See the pyramids. It’ll be great.” I didn’t know where Sudan came from, but it actually didn’t sound completely stupid, although the look May gave me said otherwise. “You were right, May. You’re always right. There’s a chance.”

“No, there isn’t,” she said. She shook her head. “I’m not doing the chemo.”

I kept going. “I didn’t know how to love you. I still don’t know. But I want to learn, I want you to teach me.”



She looked up at me with sad eyes. She put her hand over my heart, then dropped it.

“This isn’t about you or us.”

She wouldn’t look at me anymore. Her jaw was set.

I didn’t trust myself to speak. To open my mouth would be like Musa splitting the sea, but in reverse. I had come to fight, for her, for us, only to be leveled at first blow. I took in a ragged breath and lifted my hand. It hung there, uncertain, then I took a lock of her hair and curled it behind her ear, letting my fingers graze her cheek, warm from the sun and damp from her tears. I closed my fist and let it drop.

## Vita

Ambata Kazi-Nance is a writer, teacher, and mother born and raised in New Orleans, LA, currently living in Connecticut with her husband and son. She is writing a novel.