

The Common Believer

She thought religion ought to be quiet. Not a secular quiet, sequestered in the privacy of one's home, but a spiritual quietness. The quality of prayer before sunrise, that over time transformed self and society.

Tasha thought this as she watched the news on the cafe television. Two days earlier, Islamist terrorists, with Dutch passports, planted a bomb in an open-air Berlin market killing 20 people, including a pregnant woman and her two children. In the little bit of Arabic that she understood, she overheard a man in the back shout "those animals" to the screen. She closed her eyes and made two prayers. One for the victims, the other for the future victims of reprisal attacks: ordinary Muslims.

Tasha shifted her gaze away from the T.V. and towards her phone. She was conscious of time. It was nearing sunset prayer but Khaled, the owner, always let her pray in the back. They had an understanding. Marrakesh Cafe quickly became her and Asiya's favourite spot in the city, a place they had dubbed "the usual suspect" because each knew that the other would likely be there, if they weren't at home. It was also the sole shisha cafe in town that was known to still use real tobacco, defying a city-wide ban, a fact that made Asiya very happy. But as usual, Asiya was running late. Tasha, in one of her reflective moods, decided to smoke alone. Drawing in and exhaling the strong apple-cherry flavour created deeper, more uncomfortable yet entirely welcomed thoughts and feelings. Her phone beeped thrice.

Sorry bro

Class ran late

I'll be there soon inshaAllah

Tasha didn't mind. She enjoyed moments of indulging in various thoughts, embracing a kind of heaviness in spirit because when Asiya arrived, as it always did, the mood would change.

Tasha thought religion ought to be quiet. She thought this as she rose from her seat, purse in hand, as she walked past groups of older men speaking in Arabic or Somali, who perhaps should have been home with their wives and children. She walked past Khaled, who nodded and smiled, and past the cash register to the back storage area. A well-used, torso-sized prayer rug was laid on the concrete floor near dusty boxes. It was the cheaply woven, made-in-China variety with multicoloured patterns—the kind of rug ubiquitous in every praying Muslim's home, every mosque, every place where heads are lowered to the floor in Allah's name.

Having been recently used, Tasha approached the rug to smooth out a lumpy corner. She stood up and pulled back her curly, shoulder-length tresses into an untidy bun that sat atop her head. Everywhere she went, she carried a blue scarf that she tucked away in her purse, taking up more space than she would like. She pulled it out and slowly covered her hair, wrapping one end and then another around her neck and over her shoulders. One side delicately fell over her chest.

Hoping to invoke a certain state, she whispered "quiet" to herself, lingering for a few

moments before raising her hands and ushering in the prayer with “*Allahu Akbar*.” But there was no quiet state to be had. She thought of how loud the blast of bomb must have been, its shrapnel ripping through human flesh. How loud the screams of those who were able to flee must have been, and then the looping sirens and the media crews, all descending onto the scene from all corners. A shrieking mother had been unable to give a last loving glance to her children. The hysteria. The hysteria. The hysteria. After every such bombing, attack, warfare of any kind, everywhere, whoever inflicted it, it was the same loudness. *Death is quiet though*, she thought, *unbearably so*. When she emerged from prayer, more disturbed than when she entered it, she wondered when Asiya would arrive. As she walked back to her seat, Khaled asked if she wanted another cup of *shay bin nana*, mint tea.

“*Na’am*,” she said, nodding. Tasha liked the fact that Khaled sprinkled Arabic into his conversations with her even though she reminded him, each time, that she didn’t know very much. But she did know the important things like “mint tea” and “I want apple-cherry shisha” and “My father lives in Khartoum.”

She sat down and looked around the café. She liked taking it in, feeling the never-diminishing pleasure of being in a place that felt like elsewhere. With its bland wood chairs and tables, chipping beige wall paint, and few cultural references, it was designed—Tasha thought—not for the gaze of others, like some trendy ethnic restaurants that played up certain cultural features. It was an average *Maghrebi* café for the average *Maghrebi*, found everywhere in North Africa and beyond, not special in any way other than for its comfort, warm service, and tobacco shisha. It was a little drab even, but still managed to stir the embers of her wanderlust. Tasha thought the people it attracted were, somehow, evidence of its authenticity—a vibrant mix of young and old, mainly men, from across Muslim Africa and the Middle East who twisted homeland languages on their tongues. She even came to appreciate the East African man, the age of her father, a permanent fixture in the corner of the cafe who sometimes eyed her in ways that made her uncomfortable. She was in the midst of relishing in her surroundings when Asiya sashayed in with a large, infectious smile.

“Fashionably late baby!” she yelled, to the dismay of the East African man who gestured for her to lower her voice. Asiya made a faux expression of embarrassment and rushed over to the table, tossing her bags on a nearby chair.

“*That* old man is telling *me* to behave? Be easy and lower your gaze, grandpa,” she said in a low voice while taking off her jacket and adjusting her hijab which was sliding off, revealing wisps of her hair. Khaled waved at her from across the cafe. She waved back.

“*As-salaamu alaykum*, Khaled,” she said before turning back to Tasha.

“Anyway, I’m so sorry. I know I’m always late, but let me tell you what happened. We had a heated debate in class about white saviour complex, essentially. I had to set a few people straight.”

Tasha smiled and blew smoke in the air. “Did you fight with your prof again? Or that feminist one? What’s her name?”

“Nah, my prof was behaving today,” Asiya said, extending her hand to grab the shisha pipe from Tasha.

“And that feminist one, she was all right too. She landed on the right side of the debate this time. *Salaam*, by the way. You okay? You seem out of it. How’s your mom?” Asiya asked,

shifting her gaze between Tasha and her less than successful smoke rings. Tasha glanced at the television again; it had been switched to a Lebanese music channel.

“*Wa’alayum as-salaam*. I’m alright. She’s better these days, *alhamdulillah*. That Berlin attack is on my mind, though. 20 people in the grave. A pregnant mother and her kids killed, just like that.” Tasha rested her hand on her cheek, rubbing it gently at first and then more vigorously. Easing into her chair, Asiya flung her head back, setting her gaze on some insignificant mark on the ceiling.

“I heard. I saw.” She paused for the briefest of moments and then continued.

“To Allah we belong and to Him we shall return,” Asiya said. “I don’t know what else to say anymore to be honest. You know me. If this happened last year, I wouldn’t have felt much because I know how this plays out. To begin with, most people only mourn certain deaths and then regular Muslims are the ones that suffer in the aftermath and we’re expected to apologize for some crazy ISIS guy like he’s my cousin or something. Nobody cared when my cousin’s friend got punched by some guy last year. Nobody apologized for that. But I don’t even know anything anymore. It’s getting too wild. Like ISIS and company, behave. Seriously.”

Tasha nodded and gestured for the pipe.

“Death is political. It’s always been. It’s about whose death is worth mourning and whose isn’t. But honestly, I just don’t have the inclination to politicize tragedies either. The heart is heavy. It’s strange, most days, Islam gives me so much peace but at times like this, I’m reminded that...” Tasha stopped herself, noticing that Asiya was only half-listening, focusing instead on removing the ashes from the coal. Asiya took one final drag before handing it over to Tasha. The scented smoke from her long, slow exhale curled around the objects on table.

“You speak the truth, my Sista!” Asiya said. “But let’s try to keep it light tonight, okay? My parents are hassling me and I need to breathe easy right now.” She frantically looked around.

“Where’s your lover-boy, Khaled? Milk tea is deeply needed right about now.” Asiya motioned to Khaled who, engrossed in a conversation, nodded and raised his index finger. Asiya launched into a detailed and entertaining account of her day and her interactions with her latest crush. There was a time when Tasha had admired her friend for her buoyant personality, so different from her own placid nature, but over the years, she had grown irritated by Asiya’s tendency to abruptly sideline serious conversations in favour of frivolity, but she also knew that needed her dear friend’s lightness of being to lift her from her own depressive moods. Later, when Tasha was on her way home, her phone beeped five times. It was Asiya.

Yoooooooooooo i was on the train and some white guy legit just said to me...

“You’re kinda cute but too bad you’re a terrorist”

WTH?!?!?

Nobody defended me!! LOL ppl are wild!

Anyway you think Abdi is feelin me?

Tasha had cultivated a calmer disposition in recent years. If this had helped her inch closer to an elusive inner peace she was seeking, it could not be attributed to her mother who

neither prostrated in prayer nor valued quietude. She was a spirited and passionate woman who, at fifty-one-years-old, remained political and outspoken from her Black empowerment years, tempered only by Tasha's insistence that she take care of herself. Even as her health declined a few months earlier, she had been plotting out new adventures, taking up new hobbies, and chatting up hospital staff at her frequent visits. Tasha was far more concerned about her mother's state than her mother seemed to be. And now, with a clean bill of health, she was busy reinventing herself as a visual artist.

Her mother made beautiful, useless things. Ordinary stones became paint-speckled art, and these treasures adorned the widow sill this year, the year of painting. Last year, she was an aspiring dancer, swaying her fleshy hips left and right in front of a full-length mirror, in a full-body suit—black lycra on black skin. The year before that she wrote formless poems about womanhood, Jamaican-ness, and journeys east and journeys west. The year before that, there was no art.

"Tasha, honey, pass me the red paint—acrylic, not watercolour—and some warm water in that plastic container. No, no, no, not that one. The yellow one I use for paint. Yes, that one." Tasha passed her the yellow container, the one she used for paint.

"It's been a week since I've watched T.V.—no news, nothing," Tasha's mother proudly declared. "But I don't need to watch the news to know what's happening. Red is a revolutionary colour, you know, and this art is my way of opposing the *politricks*. How much do you think this one would be worth?" Her mother pointed to a pinkish greyish stone covered in intricate yet sloppy red, black, and green designs. Tasha shrugged and raised her eyebrows, uncertain of its worth or revolutionary power.

Her mother must have sensed this.

"You doubt your *mutha*? Artists give birth to social movements, especially Black woman artists. Never forget that."

"Did you take your medicine this morning?" Tasha asked, in a flat tone as she peered out of the apartment window at the church ladies in their Sunday best.

"Dearest *daughta*, I did, right before I went out," she paused for a moment. "I looked up 'painted stones' online, just for inspiration. I saw these incredible designs. One shop was selling one stone for forty dollars, and I said to myself, *I can do this*, and so I've been trying. I've been trying."

She pulled out a clean paintbrush, slimmer than the others she had used. There are leisurely Sundays, or Sundays filled with breakfast, laughter, and jazz, or prayer, breakfast, and Quran readings, and then there are Tasha's mother's Sundays, frantic and single-minded, spent gathering ordinary stones from the lakeshore yet never stopping to gaze at the water. Tasha remembers her father's Sundays were spent at the mosque. She watched her mother dip the thin brush in the red paint and remove the excess on her palette.

"Mama, I'm going to the mosque for *asr*, and then maybe a cafe—I'm not sure. I'll be home a little later though. Watch your blood pressure, not the news," Tasha said with a smile.

Her mother nodded and began humming as she made fine strokes on a new stone. Tasha lingered for a moment to see if I could detect any sadness in her expression at the mention of the mosque, but all she saw was the intense gaze of a focused and committed artist. She quite liked

her mother's way of being this year, even with her new, financially-driven obsession with producing unsellable, revolutionary art.

"*As'salaam Alaykum,*" Tasha uttered.

"Peace, my *daughta,*" she responded.

Tasha walked outside wondering if, by chance, she would run into her father, and if she would tell him, without resentment, about the sadness of having to search her mother's face for pain, and the triumph of finding none. But of course he was not there, at the mosque, or even here in the city. He was elsewhere.

Six subway stops later and she was at Masjid Abdul-Rahman, a store-front place of worship, minaret-less and nondescript. Tasha walked past the front entrance—where the men entered—and proceeded to the women's side entrance through an alleyway that always frightened her at night. Now it was late afternoon prayer, and unthreatening kids on bikes parted ways when she approached. The hallway carried the faint yet distinct scent of sandal wood oil that she noticed as she slipped off her boots, leaving them near an untidy collection of shoes. The green prayer area carpet was clean that day, and people were mostly seated on floor, though the elderly sat on chairs at the back, and some were in prayer or reading Quran. It was fuller than usual for a Sunday; she suddenly remembered that a class was starting soon after prayer. She veiled herself as she walked towards the centre of the prayer area, and caught a glimpse of young boys swaying back and forth, trance-like, through a crack in the partition that separated the men and women. This image, so common by now, always managed to transfix her. They sat cross-legged and held the Quran, each one mumbling the recitation; the low, steady hum of their voices reverberated throughout the hall. Every time she recited the Quran in Arabic, text in hand, she unconsciously swayed herself.

Urdu, mostly, spilled from the mouths of the older women who greeted one another effusively as their teenaged daughters sat cross-legged in the corner smiling, checking their phones and speaking simultaneously in hushed tones. The dominant one of the group occasionally drew attention to herself with bursts of loud laughter, attracting a scornful gaze from an elder reading Quran nearby. She led the course of the conversation and lightly picked on the other girls who giggled after everything she said. Tasha offered wishes of peace and she was the only one to respond with enthusiasm, while the rest smiled shyly, mumbling the response or were too preoccupied with their phones to notice her presence. Occasionally, young women in a skinny jeans and unveiled hair entered, quickly enveloping themselves in a full-body robe offered by the mosque, and sat quietly in one corner or another.

An Egyptian lady called after her young son who was playing and running about with another lady's daughter. The toddlers moved without reservation between the two sections.

"Ahmed!" The lady whispered harshly. "Stop running, people are trying to pray. Stay here or go to your father."

When the call to prayer came in, all noises lowered except for the children who continued running about, ignoring the admonitions of their mothers. All of the congregants, in their respective sections, lined up feet-to-feet, shoulder-to-shoulder at the urging of the Imam. The melodic sound of the recitation forced Tasha to close her eyes and indulge in prayer, even though she barely understood the Arabic being recited, much of it fading away with the departure of her father. Though almost immediately, she was pulled from her meditative state by ringing phones,

and the children who, becoming progressively louder, moved in between the worshipers and crossed her line of vision. Her own phone vibrated through part of the prayer, and she wondered if it were him, another faraway man.

“*Asalaam Alaykum wa Rahmitullahi wa Barakatu,*” uttered the Imam, concluding the prayer. *May the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon you.* After prayer, voices rose with chatter and many stood up to perform extra acts of worship removed from the congregation. She gazed around the mosque to take in the many women, young ladies, teens, children, all fresh from the cleansing power of worship. She always wondered what happened later, when they left the sanctuary between these walls. Tasha always felt spiritually connected in this space and to these people, though she was unlike most of her fellow Muslims. She knew the gazes that some would attract on the bus, the feelings of inferiority for being defined by their supposed foreignness. The mosque, at that moment, felt like a safe space, away from the harm inflicted by what lay beyond these doors, harm that Asiya had experienced only a week before. Asiya brushed it off when she called her later that evening, but she must have felt it deep inside of herself, Tasha thought. She checked her phone.

3:23 pm: *Salaam homie*
Where you at fam?

It was Asiya.

3:36 pm: *Wasalaam , about to leave the masjid. Going to do some work. Roll thru?*

3:38 pm: *Yea yea inshaAllah*
My dad is hasslin me comin soon
Where? the usual suspect?

3:38: *Where else? :)*

Tasha looked up from her phone when she felt little fingers nudge her arm. She saw the same disruptive boy who ran around the mosque, now crouching beside her with a wide, mischievous smile spread across his face.

“Ahmed!” his agitated mother called out to him. His eyes widened, but Tasha gave him a reassuring look. His presence would not be revealed just yet. At that precise moment it occurred to her that her life had involved shifting between one safe space and another, hiding herself behind the walls of a café or a mosque, places where she felt most free. She picked up her phone once more and began casually browsing through social media. A friend posted a link to an article. The headline caught her eye: “Six Dead in Quebec City Mosque Shooting.” Tasha calmly placed her phone down. She closed her eyes and yet tears still managed to escape. *Quiet*, she thought, *quiet*.