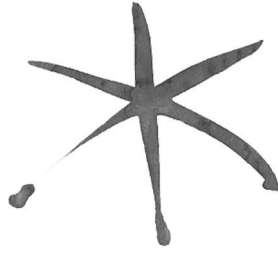




edges

edited by Angie Cruz & Marta Lucía Vargas





**Aster(ix) Journal**

*presents*

# Edges

Fall 2018



Edited by  
Angie Cruz & Marta Lucía Vargas

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# Bad Muslim

Leila Nadir

## I

I didn't want to pray. I didn't want to read the Qur'an. And I didn't want to fast. Performances required of me daily, annually. To not eat, to move my eyes over Arabic letters, to stand up, bend down, prostrate, get up, sit on my knees, thank God. I didn't believe it mattered. I didn't believe in Allah. And I didn't want to cover my hair for a supposedly benevolent, magnificent being, or read the words being delivered, via Angel Gabriel, to the illiterate Prophet Mohammed, the most unlikely of chosen ones. But I moved my body as required, wrapped my Qur'an in silk scarves, and put my breakfast down when the sun came up. Life was a charade, orchestrated to please authority. Prayer rugs were shifted, the Qur'an opened and closed, the wazu vase filled and emptied to look like water had poured from its spout. Water wiped across my forehead with my fingers, just enough to dampen my bangs, to make it look like I'd completed my ablutions. Signs. Symbols. A theatrical production staged to keep the peace.

Islam, for me, was a distorted, two-culture family drama, in which my parents played an unspoken game of high-stakes chess with one another, enacted in small moves, one square at a time, trying to gain territory, to win over, influence, control the kids, steer them toward or

away from Allah. One was honest with his plans, hiding nothing. He said, This is what I want. The other was surreptitious, deploying spies, planning a coup, rearranging her pawns when he looked away.

Religion is complicated. And when a religion is under attack like Islam, when Muslims' lives are devalued and individual acts of violence indict millions, when women who cover their hair are threatened and persecuted because females everywhere must let everyone see their black yellow brown white hair, or else they are terrorists or not free, I wonder if this is the moment I should tell my story.

My childhood religious instruction went sort of like this:

**On the Matter of Chadars (BTW This Is Not a Misspelling: *Chadar* Reflects the Afghan Persian [*Dari*] Pronunciation of چادر, the Pronunciation I Grew Up with, Said *chaw-Der*, which Almost Rhymes with my Last Name, *naw-Dir*, If Said Correctly, With a Fluttery, Rolling-R Emphasis on the Last Syllable, as Opposed to the Iranian Persian [*Farsi*] Pronunciation *Chador*)**

**Father:** We're going to the mosque. Where's your chadar?

**Mother:** Headscarves are stupid.

**Father:** Fix your chadar. I can see your hair. How many times do I have to tell you?

**Mother:** Why do women wear headscarves? And why not men? How come men's hair doesn't have to be hidden?

**Father:** Women wear chadars to protect themselves.

**Mother:** Oh, so men can't control themselves around women's bodies, they are total maniacs, and women have to hide behind fabric so they don't get hurt? Look around America. I don't see a bunch of men attacking women because their hair is showing, do you?



I need to clarify: this back-and-forth dramatic reproduction does not refer to any real conversation held between my Afghan, Muslim father and my Slovak-American, latent Catholic mother. My parents did not deliver these statements in the spirit of debate or how-should-we-raise-the-kids discussion. Their pro- or anti- Islam stances were not even uttered in each other's presence, at least not exactly or directly. My father delivered his pronouncements to his children, in the "public" space of the home, which, for a patriarch, is wherever, whenever. No need for self-censorship. His law, his rule. Sometimes relayed gently, *Come here, let me explain*. Sometimes dropped down from above in the form of wall-shaking commands that made his children scramble and pretend they had something to do in another room. So, although he wasn't addressing my mother, she heard all.

My mother expressed her opinions privately, when my father wasn't around. After hours, so to speak. She was a teacher at the same school attended by my siblings and me, so our schedules were coordinated, our movements aligned. Plenty of Mom-kid time while my father was at work. When we returned home in the afternoon, at the end of our school day, my mother chipped away at my father's faith while warming dinner at the stove, letting me and my siblings catch up on all the TV shows he didn't allow. (When I was a teenager, she secretly recorded *Saturday Night Live* for me with the VCR—from our tiny New York State living room, NYC was already calling me.) In the dark early evenings of winter, when the sun would set at 4:30pm, she casually questioned the oddities of Afghan culture while handing us ornaments to hang on our plastic Christmas tree before he got home to object. (Once it was laden with crude ceramic ornaments made by his children stabbing away at clay in art class, how could he order the tree taken down?) While my father was pressing his foot to the gas pedal, changing lanes on Rochester's 490, cruising down 441, headed home to a split-level ranch in rural Wayne County, his family was living a life

he couldn't imagine. His home in the country was full of Americans who loved Christmas and un-Islamic TV. It was full of Americans who shifted to our own special version of Afghan theater the moment he opened the front door.

*Salaam Baba jaan!* Yes, we said our prayers, yes, we read a page of the Qur'an, yes, yes. Let's eat dinner, *Bismallah-i-rahman-i-rahim*.

And he smiled, so pleased. He was proud. He didn't know.

My father was consistent. Or maybe I should say he was transparent. Not because he tried to be but because he couldn't help it. His needs, loves, fears, paranoia, he flung them around the house—the way a toddler clenches his fists and screams because he doesn't have the skills to be more diplomatic. The world was good/bad, moral/immoral, black/white. Afghan/not. Emotions, hopelessly, painfully bare. (Do you love me?) And my mother was a puddle of distracted grey. I looked in her eyes, I tried all the time to initiate a meeting, a spontaneous one-on-one, *Hey, it's me*, but they always bounced unavailable. My mother lived one way in my father's presence, another when he wasn't around. Please the patriarch, roll your eyes behind his back. Lessons for her children on how to live a double life, never addressing what was really going on. It was like grade school: she and I had a nasty clique, spreading rumors, picking on the weak kid, playing nice when an adult—the principal, the lunch lady—walked by. My father was the weak one and he was the authority.

**About Sunday School, which Most Local Muslims Believed Should Really Have Been Saturday School, Because Sunday School Sounded Too Christian, But the Mosque Leadership, in the 1980s, Decided, Despite Fervent Disgruntlement, Better to Align the Calendar of the Islamic Center Of Rochester ("I.C.R." for Short) with Regular American School Schedules, so Extra-Curricularly Inclined Muslim Kids Could Compete on Saturdays with their**

**American Classmates in Soccer Games, Wrestling Matches, Science Fairs, Chess Tournaments, and Spelling Bees (This Policy Has Since Changed)**

**Baba:** Dr. Malik says the new mosque in Rochester is ready to open.

**Mom:** Religion. Everyone getting together to worship a god they can't see. Have you ever seen this Allah? Where's the evidence?

**Baba:** No more meeting in the basement at Dr. Malik's house. What a wonderful day. Rochester opens its first mosque!

**Mom:** Dr. Malik—he seems like an arrogant man. Where's his wife? What does she do? Have you ever seen her when you were at his house studying the Qur'an?

**Baba:** And the mosque has started Sunday School classes!

**Mom:** My parents made me go to Catholic School on weekends. The nuns liked to hit kids with rulers. Right here, on my knuckles, like this.

**Baba:** I signed you up for Mrs. Bakari's class for 11-13 year olds.

**Mom:** Who is Mrs. Bakari? All the mosque teachers are Pakistani housewives with no education, bored women looking for something to do. I wouldn't trust them to teach children.

**Baba:** I'm disappointed you got a 60% on your test on the life of Prophet Mohammed. This is a very serious topic. Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, led a life that is a model for all Muslims.

**Mom:** Don't worry about that quiz. You read a long book, poorly written, with spelling mistakes, and she quizzed you on three random facts hidden in two paragraphs. That's not how you make a test.

**Baba:** And Mrs. Bakari tells me you haven't been memorizing your surahs.

**Mom:** Memorization is not how kids learn, memorizing chapters word

for word that they can't even understand. What do you even get out of that? Do you even know what any of it means? Maybe Mrs. Bakari should teach you Arabic before she requires you to memorize a bunch of Qur'an chapters.

The mosque's special school and Sunday prayers colonized half our weekend, which was a real tax on my schedule. By the time I was a teenager, I didn't care about being a good Muslim, praying, memorizing, chadar-ing, and all that. I was a Huge Nerd, and by high school, I was obsessed with "getting into a good college." I'd rather have been reading, and re-reading, a chapter of white-washed American history from a state-sanctioned textbook all weekend than praying at the mosque. I had a plan, and it took time: perfect grades → win a full-ride scholarship to a college faraway → escape my parents' house → achieve independence. But attending Shouldn't-Be-Sunday School was non-negotiable. I didn't even feel I could fake sick. Plus the future of Afghanistan depended on my family.

My father was sort of the leader of the local Afghan community at the time. He was the most assimilated, the most American, the one with the American wife and the four Honor Roll children, the one who'd actually chosen to go to college in the U.S., and to move here permanently, before the war with the Soviets had even broken out. But he was also extremely patriotic. When the Cold War, and the Russian tanks and the American rocket launchers, denied him the option to return home, he became obsessed with saving Afghanistan, its people, its culture. He sponsored refugees and helped them adapt to American life. He wrote our congresswoman about expediting immigration applications for not only family members but also total strangers. He wrote his senators. He called newspapers and news stations and gave interviews. He provided his perspective on "Escaping the War in Afghanistan," which was the title of an article in Rochester's *Democrat &*

*Chronicle*, and I've even found a quotation from him in the *Los Angeles Times*, about the Soviet withdrawal of troops in 1989. Locally, he took it upon himself to ensure that all area Afghan kids didn't "lose their culture."

Every Sunday morning, my father drove into Rochester with his four children and gathered up all the Afghan youth he could find to deliver to the mosque's Shouldn't-Be-Sunday School. We picked up confused Afghan refugee kids who spoke no English and lived in furniture-less apartments with their parents in crime-ridden inner-city neighborhoods. We picked up the snazzily dressed offspring of Western-educated Afghan bourgeoisie who resided in sterile housing-development cul-de-sacs. When some Egyptians at the mosque realized my father was driving around town, acting as a self-appointed Mosque Busdriver, willingly picking up any young Muslims he could fit into his van, we started picking up their kids too. Our services targeted spiritually imperiled Afghan boys and girls, but ultimately, we made no distinctions regarding class, color, ethnicity, nationality, or dialect. No matter if there weren't enough seats to go around, no matter if we had long ago run out of seatbelts. Equal opportunity pile-up. If you were Muslim, climb aboard my father's Volkswagen van. I called it the Afghan Cara-van.

On our way out of the house into the caravan on Sunday mornings, my siblings and I marched down the stairs with our backpacks filled with Qur'ans for memorizing surahs and typed-up, photocopied reading assignments<sup>1</sup>. I already had wrapped my chadar around my

---

1 I avoided memorizing surahs, but I loved reading those little booklets. They came in the form of photocopies of photocopies, authors unknown, publishers long gone, stapled and bound at copy shops and sold for \$5 a bundle in the mosque's library-store. These were our only English access to Islamic history, to the details of the life of Prophet Mohammed, to the cities of Mecca and Medina

brown, Slovak-Afghan hair, and I watched my little brother leap down the steps, his head of curls bouncing like an advertisement for body-building miracle shampoo. I fantasized about shaving my head. Would that be modest enough for my father? If my hair was so controversial, why not lose it altogether? Why did I have to keep my hair long and then wear a scarf over it? Wasn't that a circuitous route to modesty? And why, on Sundays, did my father make me put it on before I was even out the door, as if the mosque grounds, and Allah's gaze, suddenly extended into our front yard on Sundays, which, of course, was the Christian holy day?

I blamed the chadar for making my scalp itch. I was always sticking a finger under the fabric to do a bit of casual scratching. But the irritation was probably more due to my poor hygiene, because Afghan chadars are loose and flowing, not restrictive at all. As a teenager, I washed my hair everyday. Blow-dry, mousse, curl, hairspray, all the processes and chemical products required of American females in the eighties in order to prove we'd successfully conquered nature and gravity. But on Sundays, who cared? I just wrapped my hair with one of the chadars sent by my aunts from Afghanistan, an oily, flattened, matted mess, full of hairspray flakes. The sign of women's anti-feminism smothering my scalp, I thought, the counter-sign to my mother's puffy blond highlighted Clairol liberation.

My mother didn't join us at the mosque on Sundays. She abstained with the moral righteousness of a nineteenth-century teetotaler, her childhood Catholicism infusing her adult faith in the secular. She didn't drink. She wouldn't touch alcohol. She believed mothers were pure,

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circa 600 A.D. Full of folklore and legends and narrative designed for kids, these stapled booklets never got around to declaring moral rules, except for No Killing Spiders, because a spider once saved Prophet Mohammed's life, and I've never killed one (purposefully) since.

all-knowing saints (like the Virgin Mary, whom, ironically, she didn't believe in anymore). And she was too smart to believe in God or spend time in the mosque. Virtue through abstinence, the Catholic way.

But she truly couldn't wait for her children to leave for the Shouldn't-Be-Sunday School. She thought a mosque education was a bunch of indoctrination, brainwashing her son and three daughters to believe hocus-pocus and not think straight, but she paused her criticism on Sundays so she could have the house to herself. A Special Ed teacher Monday through Friday, she managed a multi-grade classroom of elementary-age students with learning disabilities, behavioral outbursts, and not enough to eat. Sundays were her only break from teaching kids and mothering kids and kids kids kids. While my father was beeping the horn from the driveway, summoning his Muslim student-children to the Afghan Cara-van, my mother was already deep into the couch with a cup of coffee. Thank God her husband was taking the kids to the mosque. Not yet changed out of her robe, she had *The New York Times* open on her lap, scanning headlines for the pleasure she was about to have soaking up culture and news, and the science section, with the proof and experiments and latest knowledge based on reports and fact.

My little sisters announced our leaving: "Bye, Mom!"

I was afraid she would see me in my chadar, which she told me was stupid, and bad for women, and here I was covering my hair in our living room. What would she think?

Eyes on the paper, mug to her lips, she didn't look up. "Bye, kids!"

**Regarding my Name, which Was Almost Zainab, but Was Legally Christine, and Temporarily Leila, Then Ultimately Aliyeh (and in My Early Twenties, During a Series of Art Performances, Kristina Mohammed, a Pseudonym Invented for What Should Now Be Obvious Reasons) until I Petitioned an Oneida County Judge, in New York State, Placed a Notice in a Newspaper, and Settled the**

**Matter at Age 35, When I Combined Part of the Name my Mother Had Signed on my Birth Certificate, Christine Michelle Nadir, with the Name My Father Chose for Me, the Name of a Mythological Female Hero, so that I Became Leila Christine Nadir**

**Mom:** Your father was in Afghanistan when you were born, and he sent a letter asking me to name you Zainab, after his mother, but I couldn't see you as Zainab. How many nice girl names start with the letter Z?

**Baba:** Christine—I'm not sure if that's a good name for a Muslim girl. I'm going to call you Leila. Leila jaan.<sup>2</sup>

**Mom:** Your father's letter arrived too late anyway. I'd already filled out the birth certificate.

**Baba:** Listen while I will tell you the story of Leila and Majnun.

**Mom:** I picked out the name *Christine* way back when I was a teenager. I remember writing it down in one of my notebooks, doodling it when I was bored in class. I knew one day I'd have a daughter, and I'd name her *Christine Michelle*. It was my favorite name. For my first-born daughter.

**Baba:** Leila and Majnun are the Romeo and Juliet of Persian Literature.

**Mom:** How do you feel about your father changing your name

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2 Note to non-Persian readers: *Jaan* is not pronounced like the female name Jan. Persian has frequent "aw" vowel sounds. Imagine jaan as a quickly said "lawn" but with a j: jawn. Explaining the linguistic and cultural significance of *jaan* is nearly impossible and maybe some other time I will try, but for now, just know, it's added to names as a term of endearment. It can feel sincere, sentimental, and meaningful, though it can also feel mandatory at the same time. To drop it off a name can be significant, offensive, sending a message. It's as if using *jaan* automatically makes you a sweeter person, polite, with manners. But don't take my word for any of this. I'm a Half-ghan.



suddenly? You're ten years old, and you've always been Christine.

**Baba:** Leila's and Majnun's families wouldn't let them be together, and when Majnun couldn't be with Leila, he went crazy and died.

**Mom:** Tell your father he can't just change your name. Your name has always been Christine. For ten years. He can't just change it without asking you.

**Baba:** *Majnun* means *diwaneh*, crazy, mad. Without Leila, Majnun went insane.

**Mom:** Did you talk to your father?

**Baba:** Ahmed Zahir wrote a song about a girl named Leila. Let me see if I can find a recording in my tapes. *Leili Leili Leili jaan, jaan...*

**Mom:** What did your father say?

I was Shakespeare's Juliet of Persia, someone to fall in love with, and even though, already in elementary school, I was barely allowed to talk to boys, if I did talk to them they would probably go crazy because I was so lovely and magical and fine. I had an Afghan pop song all about me. It made me want to stare at my reflection in the mirror: Is it, could it be, true?

But an injustice had been committed. I complained to my father, as instructed, and he agreed to stop calling me Leila but only if I picked out a new name more appropriate for a Muslim girl. On a sheet of ruled paper torn from one of my notebooks, he made a list, thirty or so suggestions, the original Persian and the English spelling side-by-side, and I pretended to study and compare. When he wasn't around, I dutifully held up the list to my mother.

Which name?

She pointed at *Aliyeh*. "At least this one makes sense."

My mother could read and write basic Persian, from lessons my father had given her long ago. Before their marriage became an epic battle for their children's souls, they must have collaborated a bit. She

could see that *Aliyeh* started with the letter  $\varepsilon$  (pronounced “ein,” a guttural A-type sound, from the back of the throat), like the rest of my siblings’ names. My father was out of the country when I was born, but he had been in the States for all of theirs, at Newark-Wayne Community Hospital, in a rural delivery room, where, when my parents discovered the sex of their newborns, he’d suggest Persian names and my mother picked out her favorite, always settling on names that began with all variations of the name of Prophet Mohammed’s cousin and son-in-law, the first Shia Imam, Ali.

Christine remained my name among Americans, at my American public school, within my mother’s Slovak-American, Catholic family. *Aliyeh* became my name at the mosque, the name my Afghan family would call me for perpetuity, the name my Afghan father thought I picked out but really it was the orchestration all along of his American wife, angry that, when he hadn’t been in the country for my delivery, he deigned to reject her Christine. But the matter of my name wasn’t over. The tension about my name made my brother and sisters so uncomfortable that they avoided calling me anything at all. Christine offended my father, and also, it seemed, Islam and Allah. “*Aliyeh b’go!*” he’d yell across the house whenever he heard a whisper of *Christine*, the same way he’d yell, “*Farsi b’go!* Speak Persian! No English!” And *Aliyeh*, though my mother chose it, was treated by her as a betrayal, another disappointment in a lifetime of this-is-not-how-my-life-was-supposed-to-turn-out.

My youngest sister found a solution, a sneak maneuver proving that, even at three years old, she had learned how to navigate my parents’ cold war.<sup>3</sup> She and I were close. Though I was only eight years

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3 This may be a good time to mention that I have published an essay, titled “Cold War,” about how my parents met, in *North American Review* 298.3 (Summer 2013).

older than her, I imagined she was my daughter. When I pushed her down the street in her cheap, wobbly-wheel stroller, I believed I looked so mature and capable at four feet tall, so big and grown-up, that I was sure, any moment, a stranger would look lovingly at my baby and remark upon my wonderful maternal nature, “Oh, what a nice mom you are.” My baby sister and I slept in the same bed, and every night I rubbed her back until she fell asleep, an arrangement my mother encouraged because this sister was a bed-wetter and this meant that almost every night I awoke to urine in the sheets, and because I was such a good mom, I’d strip the mattress, rinse her off in the bathtub, and clean up the mess on my own without waking our parents. Having no name to address me cut through our intimacy. It’s like opening your mouth to call out to a loved one in a dream, but you’ve forgotten their name. So she called me Sister. Nobody could object.<sup>4</sup>

**On the Topic of Inter-Marriage, that is, Whether Muslims Can Marry Non-Muslims, or Put Another Way, Whether “Believers” Can Marry “Non-Believers” (A Somewhat Related Side-story: At Shouldn’t-Be-Sunday School, I Learned that during Prophet Mohammed’s Time the “Non-Believers” Were Actually “Paganists,” and They Liked to Mold Gold into the Shapes of Animals and Worship these Objects like Powerful Gods, and though I Didn’t Learn this Next Part in our Sunni-Dominated Mosque, my Father Told Me that This Is Why Shi’a Muslims, which Is What We Were, Prayed with Our Hands Down at our Sides, rather than Clapsed**

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4 Lest my readers fall into any sentimental delusions about the power of sibling bonding in the face of parental instability, let me un-delude you: this sister hasn’t spoken to me in ten years. “Unhappy families are conspiracies of silence. The one who breaks the silence is never forgiven.” Jeanette Winterson wrote that.

**Together at our Hearts Like Sunnis at the Mosque, Because Fake-Muslim Paganists Used to Place Idols in their Sleeves When They Prayed, and When I Heard This, I Thought, Wasn't I Still Fake-Praying Too, even with My Hands Down, Worshipping Something Else?)**

**Baba:** The Qur'an says that Muslim men can marry non-believing women, but if the situation is reversed, if a Muslim woman wants to marry a non-Muslim man, Allah says, that is not allowed.<sup>5</sup>

**Mom:** What if you are an Afghan in America going to college as a graduate student, and you never even mention Islam to your American girlfriend, you drink beer at parties, you marry her in a Catholic ceremony, in a church with a priest and all that, and you have children together, and then years later, you decide, all of a sudden, that you are actually quite religious and your children have to be good Muslims and go to the mosque? What does Allah say about that?

**Baba:** Allah allows men to marry women who are not Muslims because it is a strategy for gaining followers of Islam.

**Mom:** I guess your brother can marry whomever he likes then. Too bad for you and your sisters. You'll need to find Muslim men. Maybe you can join a Muslim Student Association or something? Maybe there are some boys at the mosque you like?

**Baba:** Allah understands men and women and how they are different.

---

5 My father was actually wrong about this. The Qur'an states that a Muslim woman can marry any man of the book. I have never read the Qur'an in English, only in Arabic, which I didn't understand, so I have to thank my dear friend Zohra Saed, who has a beautiful name starting with the letter Z, for sharing this fact with me. "So any one of the four holy books," she wrote me in an email after reading a draft of this essay. "It's patriarchal culture that hides that."

We have to trust his judgment. Women are more likely to convert to their husbands' religion. Not the other way around.

**Mom:** Is that what your father said? I guess it's just a matter of time before I convert. He's really persuading me. And watch out, because, you know, American converts are the worst, the strictest, the most religious ones, like Kaka Nima's wife.

Kaka Nima's wife, whose actual name I never knew, scared me.<sup>6</sup> Her

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6 The following note about Kaka Nima's wife's name is not only for non-Persians although it initially reads that way: "Kaka" means uncle in Persian, a language spoken by both Iranians (Farsi dialect) and by Afghans (Dari dialect), and children preface adult's names with *kaka* or *khaleh* (aunt) out of respect, creating a more familial feeling than distant titles like "Mr." and "Mrs." In addition, proper names are often replaced by job titles—Afghans called my father *Engineer*—or family references, especially, it seemed, for women, such as "Hamid's mother" or "Hamayun's wife." (Hence, Kaka Nima and Kaka Nima's wife.) In my family, the Afghan members called my mother *zen-maamaa*, which means "Uncle's Wife." (*Maamaa* also means uncle. *Zen* means wife.) My father's sister, my aunt Ammeh jaan, whom I will discuss later in this essay, called my mother *zen-maamaa*, and her children, aged toddler through teenager, did the same, all out of respect. This practice, however, annoyed my mother. Why couldn't she be called by her God-given name? She was also disturbed that the Persian word for "wife" was the same word used for "woman": *zen*. So essentially, to my mother's grumpy ear, these little kids were calling her "uncle's woman." This was all a bit too un-feminist for her taste, and probably just too sexist and too Afghan, and another way to point out the superiority of her progressive American ways. Perhaps she complained, because at some point, *zen-maamaa* was replaced by a new name my father made up for her, and he instructed his nieces and nephews to replace *zen-maamaa* with *gul-jaan*, essentially *Dear Flower*. My mother, the sweet flower. Was this my father's joke? Or another

husband, obviously named Kaka Nima, was my father's best buddy at the mosque. They were the only regular Persians in attendance (though Kaka Nima was from Iran). They sat cross-legged on the floor, side-by-side, in the men's area of the prayer hall. The beads of their *tasbeih* rolled through their fingers while they waited for the *azaan* to call them to prayer. The two men had much in common even beyond language and culture. They both had thinning hair with unabashed combovers and middle-aged bellies, not big but definitely, roundly there. They wore identical fashion, switching between traditional attire (*perhan tumban*) some days and the mid-managerial professional look (pressed slacks and tucked-in, button-down shirts) on others. And they both had pale, blond American wives, whom they'd met during their liberal college years, and a string of light brown half-Persian children as a result. They differed, however, in that Kaka Nima's wife had converted. She'd followed her husband's lead, as Allah predicted, as Baba said would happen. And my mother was a hold-out.

To me, Kaka Nima's wife seemed like my mother's evil twin, like she could have been my mom with just one turn or twist of fate, *khoda nekoneh*, God Forbid, the American woman who became an official Muslim with an official hijab who took Islam too seriously. More than anything, I feared her beady green eyes landing on me. Those eyes could sense religious infractions from afar, hone in from across a room, as if she were a stand-in for omniscient Allah. She pointed at wisps of hair peeking out from the loose headscarves of girls giggling in corners. (None of the Middle Eastern Moms did that.) Little boys chased each other maniacally in circles around our little upstate mosque, treating its perimeter like a racetrack, and she stood police-like, dead-center in their path, slowing their sprinting with her statuesque moral presence and disapproving glare. And when the mosque moms sold \$1 pizza

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instance of Afghan keeping-up-appearances?

over the kitchen counter to Shouldn't-Be-Sunday School students after *dhuhr* prayers, taking the dollar and looking the other way, Kaka Nima's wife busted the kids trying to slide an extra slice onto their plates. She is the one who discovered that the mosque guardian, a chubby man who lived in a tiny downstairs apartment, had hidden bacon in the mosque fridge. She mobilized the mosque moms into a raucous stampede, knocked on his door, and had him fired on the spot.

My mother came face-to-face with Kaka Nima's wife about four times every year, on Friday nights during the month of Ramadan, when Muslim families came together to pray and break their fasts with a communal dinner at the mosque. I'm not sure why my mother joined us for Iftar, but perhaps it was because my parents prided themselves on their traditional values. They prioritized eating every meal together as a family, albeit unhappily. (We must have unhappy dinners together!) For Iftar, my mother draped a chadar over her puffy, hair-sprayed hair, like a tent floating on a scaffolding of stiff curls, suspended an inch above her scalp. This nodding rejection at Muslim female humility got her through the mosque's double doors. Her lack of respect embarrassed me in front of my teachers, my classmates, but my father seemed grateful for the act, and he met her halfway. During Iftar, the men congregated on one side of the community room—I saw a mix of men's dull clothing at the far end, shades of brown, white, black fabric—and the women gathered on the other, with their pink orange purple green *shalwar kameez* and chadars. Everyone gender-segregated, except for some African-American families, my father and Kaka Nima, their American wives, and their children. We carried our paper plates and plastic forks to the tables set up on the balcony overlooking the prayer hall, a quiet mixed-gendered space away from the segregated, monochrome/multi-colored masses from Central Asia and the Middle East.

While eavesdropping on the adults' conversations, I taste-tested tiny forkfuls of the potluck dishes spooned onto my plate, having learnt

by the time I was in my teens to identify the Pakistani dishes before their searing spices lit a flame in my mouth. Kaka Nima and my father filled their empty, fasting bellies, chatting while they chewed. What was the latest on Ronald Reagan, Khomeini, the mujahideen, when would Sunday School become Saturday School, how many goals did their daughters score in last week's soccer games, how was family in Afghanistan, in Iran, in Kabul, in Tehran, and in all the faraway places that exiles of their two homelands' revolutions had ended up. And my mother and Kaka Nima's wife sat across the table from each other, straining. Two American women with so much in common and so little to say. Porcelain-white skin, green eyes, Persian husbands, and chadars (sincere or not) over their blond hair. Women who had once talked to boys on the telephone, tried out for cheerleading teams, dressed in formal gowns for formal dances, all of which their Muslim daughters (fake or not) were now forbidden to do. I wonder if Kaka Nima's wife had also been Catholic, like my mother. The falling-so-easily into moral clarity, universal truth. Science and religion, the lab and the holy book. Back at the mosque on Sundays, without my mother beside me, I turned my face into my chadar and walked the other way whenever I saw Kaka Nima's wife. I was afraid she knew about my other life, that I was a fake Muslim, that I wore mini-skirts to regular school and my mother bought them for me and told me, don't worry, put them on after your father leaves for work. That I thought my chadar was stupid and on Sundays I didn't wash my hair and I had a dirty scalp. That I faked my period so I wouldn't have to pray, and I pretended to fast during Ramadan but sometimes ate small bites of whatever I wanted all day. If I wasn't careful, Kaka Nima's wife would focus her convert eyes on me, green laser-beams penetrating my soul, and she would say, "Your father might not know it, but I know. I know about the secret club you have with your mother, and I know what she says about me, and I know what she says about him."



## II

My mother melted sugar in a sauce pan for *baklava*. She baked a crunchy layer of egg at the bottom of the *chala*. She rolled little circles of dough out on the counter to make wheat pockets for fried *boulani*, filled with mashed potato and *nana*, a special variety of leeks grown by my father in our vegetable garden from seeds brought from Afghanistan. To make *mantu*, she bought a double boiler. “Now this is fancy,” she said, pulling the stainless-steel parts from the manufacturer’s box, the first gourmet appliance purchase, I bet, in the history of her Slovak immigrant family. I grew up immersed in Afghan cuisine prepared oddly enough, yet expertly, by my American mother, and while she baked *naan* one day, I remember, as a young girl, telling her a story I’d heard at the mosque about Allah and Paradise and the Day of Judgment. About how the graves in the cemetery would open, the dead would rise, start walking, and the sun would come closer and closer to the earth, until it was just above everyone’s heads, and it would be so hot that humans would melt unless they were believers and then Allah would give them a special umbrella to protect them from the heat. I was worried my mother would be left behind, even worse, melted down, in pain, suffering. The stories taught by my earliest mosque teachers were simple stories, uncomplicated and accessible for young minds, with clear opposites—*believers unbelievers*, *Believers Unbelievers*, *BELIEVERS UNBELIEVERS*—categories best not told to children being raised in a bicultural home with two discordant parents.

I was still quite small—small enough that I could look down straight into the oven while standing upright—and I watched my mother bend to pull a sheet of golden naan off its baking rack, set it down on the stove top, and rub the end of a half-unwrapped stick of butter across the top. Up, down. The butter melted across the bread, glistening, the way

it does on a hot cob of corn, and she asked me, Who told me this story? How did I know it was true? Could it be that Allah had communicated with me directly?

What couldn't be demonstrated by science, she said, proven with an experiment, based on fact, seen with her own eyes, she didn't believe. I opened my mouth to respond, but my faith had just crashed into her logic, my religion into her liberal secularism, my dutiful absorption of adult words into a new who-do-I-trust. I watched her push the buttered naan back in the oven and shut the door. She had twenty-four years on me, she was a teacher of elementary-age children. Did she feel my struggle to drag the pieces of a sentence into a presentable pile? I remember only shared silence, a wordless coexisting, as the steam of freshly baked bread filled in the air. My mother waited a few minutes for the butter to turn the naan's crust into a luxurious, toasty-creamy-crunchy crust. Then she bent down and swiftly pulled it out of the oven with a pot-holdered hand, all done, just the way her Muslim husband liked it.

### III

The oven scene was my first memory of my childhood home quaking under the burden of religion. Islam was what could be grasped. It was made up of categories and labels that fit the frame. Islam was what could be grasped. It could be reduced to categories and labels that fit the frame, that covered over uncomfortable, inarticulable truths, the way politicians, in their stump speeches, scapegoat Islam today. Words about religion can be alibis, in private homes, in politics, in public policy, the excuses for the questions we don't want to ask because we're not going to like the answers.

An ongoing concern of my father's was that my mother—he wasn't sure how—was turning his children against him. My father had lost

both his parents by the time he was eight years old. A boy without a mother, without a father, now a father with four kids, he was easily confused. I imagine he held rules in his fists, tightly, as tokens of cultural security. This is who he was, this is who his children would be, and if he opened his grip and passed down his Afghan bullet-points—Shouldn't-Be-Sunday School, prayers five times a day, fasting and Ramadan, Persian lessons (but only sometimes), chadars (but pretty much only at the mosque), no daughters talking to boys on the telephone (unless I absolutely had to discuss homework assignments because my teacher said: that story always worked for me), and no after-school activities, except for soccer, which he loved—then his son and daughters would be good people, they would love him, they would be like him, he wouldn't be alone. We wouldn't lose our culture. He wouldn't lose his culture.

But he was outplayed by an American teacher, who knew how to manage children and make life lessons fun and mix authority with being your best friend, who knew how to combine ice cream and spaghetti and a Golden Oldies Dance Party with a dose of secularism. Home court advantage.

#### IV

One of my last memories of my parents' religious problems took place years later, when I was a teenager, on a Shouldn't-Be-Sunday School day. The weather was pleasant because, though I was wearing my chadar and Afghan *perhan tumban* for a day of humbleness at the Islamic Center, I remember my mother was wearing a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a white t-shirt. I never really enjoyed weekly classes at the mosque. Kaka Nima's wife's beady green eyes were always around the corner, my scalp itched, and I had to memory-cram surahs before tests to avoid becoming The Bad Girl with the American Mother. But I had a friend, Fareshta, from Pakistan, a fellow nerdy girl whom I met while being

nerdy together during our teenage-level class. I always looked forward to spending the day with her.

The Caravan for Afghan Youth at Risk of Losing their Culture was preparing to take off on its series of cross-county suburban-urban pickups in honor of Allah. I was in the front seat, chadar in place. Seat belts buckled. Notebooks, Qur'ans, pens, pencils properly stowed in backpacks, the van's engine cranked—when, after a night of screaming and fighting and wall-punching and keep-the-kids-up-all-night (my Walkman got me through those; I just kept on studying for that scholarship), my mother stomped down the sidewalk, barefoot, and stood in front of the van so it couldn't move without running her over, and stared at her husband through the windshield, yelling, "I'm not letting you go!" My parents were finally talking directly to each other about religion.

This conversation happened.

**Baba:** Please move. We have to go.

**Mom:** No, I'm tired of the mosque mosque mosque mosque mosque mosque mosque.

**Baba:** Stop this. We are leaving. You know you take my children away from me everyday but I am only taking my children to the mosque.

**Mom:** What are you talking about?

**Baba:** They love you more than me.

**Mom:** Children don't do that. I never once asked myself which parent I loved more, my mother or my father. That's crazy.

**Baba:** You don't support me. You don't understand me.

**Mom:** If you feel them pulling away, it's because of your rules. This is America. You're driving them away by forcing Islam on them.

**Baba:** I want them to be good people, good Muslims. Afghans are Muslims.

**Mom:** Then why are you the only one driving all the Muslim kids in

the entire city of Rochester to the mosque? None of your friends care. They don't make their kids read the Qur'an every morning, or pray five times a day. It's too much!

**Baba:** They love you more than me. I can feel it.

**Mom:** Children need to learn different cultures, not just yours. They need to be exposed to different ways of life, and then they can decide for themselves. That's the best way.

**Baba:** Islam is the Afghan way. I want them to know my culture.

**Mom:** Well, what about my culture?

**Baba:** This whole country is your culture.

**Mom:** Then why don't the children learn my religion? I went to church every Sunday!

**Baba:** Be honest. You have no religion.

**Mom:** I'm not going to let you take my children to the mosque anymore! It's all Islam. Why don't I take them to church?

**Baba:** I never said they couldn't go to church.

**Mom:** Well, I'm taking them today. It's Sunday. Kids, let's go, we're going to church.

My mother looked at me, in the front seat, through the windshield of the van. Her ally. Her secret team-member. But I didn't move. My father did nothing. My three siblings froze. Church? Really? Whaaa? Wasn't religion the antithesis of truth? She had switched the rules of the game when her strategy didn't work.

She sank to the ground, her head between her knees, crying. It was one of those moments when an avalanche of repressed emotions buries you deep, because you didn't take care when you should've, and you don't know how it all started, and now you are alone, gasping for air, with nothing to hold onto. It had never been about God or science, about church or freedom, or teaching her children about multiculturalism and pluralistic perspectives. It was about her marriage,

and her endless problems with my father, their deadlocked relationship, their Catholic-Muslim refusal to divorce. The way he scared us at times, with rules and commands and his superior physical strength. His recent edict that the only college I could attend was the nearby University of Rochester, so I could live at home under his supervision. If I didn't get that scholarship, the army was my backup way out. But none of that was discussed. And neither was the fact that he didn't listen to her needs. Or his children's needs. And how she needed his approval. She was unable to stop pleasing him despite her growing rage. Always a good girl. And the children were the way to punish him for what he hadn't done right. If he wasn't the husband he was supposed to be, and if she couldn't break out, she would make her children express her emotions, her judgments, and he wouldn't know it, and it would be a secret, but the children would be hers. She would be the favorite parent, the always-right mom. She would show him she had been on higher moral ground all along, affirmed by their children's votes.

My mother once told me I would love going to college. I was opening university brochures at my desk, hoping I could go somewhere beyond Rochester, somewhere far from my parents' home, and she used an adjective I never forgot. "It's so neat," she said, "to meet people from other places." Neat? It was if my mother's mental-world was so full-of-sameness, so believing in white, that she forgot that the neat guy she met in college was my father, and I was growing up with him, that I was his half-Afghan daughter, bilingual in English and Persian, that I spent weekends at the mosque in Rochester, hanging out with Pakistani, Egyptian, African-American, and Iranian Muslim kids. I might pass for white, and she might have called me Christine, but I wasn't in her club. For my mom, I was one of the neat ones.

My father was a stranger in his own house, and my mother was sobbing in front of a caravan of neat people. One neat husband and four neat kids.

## V

While I was being raised Muslim by one parent, I was taught by the other to believe that Muslims were one way, that they blindly followed a book and didn't think for themselves, that religion could be trumped by non-religion, by reason and science, so I couldn't be Muslim, there was no way. My childhood was a Muslim-enough act to keep my father content and an anti-Muslim promise to my mother that I was like her, and not like her disappointing husband.

All the while, the Muslims in my life welcomed me into their homes, into their kitchens, their backyards, teaching me, slowly, even before I recognized the lessons, what religion and culture really mean when they are not judged as monolithic ways of life or the outdated precursors of supposedly rational modes of thought, when they are not pitted against secular blind faith.

The rituals, the spiritual patterns, the sacred days. The lived, evolving, collective memory, transplanted to America but increasingly, slowly, at home. Anchors of identity as light as the breath of the everyday. You only feel them when you are displaced.

One Ramadan, I was helping my aunt, Ammeh jaan, with preparations for the evening meal that would break our family's collective fasting, I saw her somewhat unapologetically (her back was barely turned) stuff a handful of rice into her mouth and gulp it down with a sip of water. The muscles in my face went slack. My God-fearing Muslim aunt. During Ramadan, she was not supposed to eat. And no drinking, not even water, sunup to sundown. When she turned around and saw my look, she put her finger to her lips, smiled, and winked, "Don't tell." This was my father's devout sister, married in Kabul before she'd even finished high school, always in traditional *perhan tumban*. She never left her house without a chadar over her hair. ("Have you

noticed?” my mother would always ask, nudging me, making sure I saw.) And now this aunt was smiling at the naiveté of her teenage American niece. She told her daughter Robina to give me a bowl of rice. I probably looked pale, my blood sugar low, because I sort of, kind of, fasted. I never gave up certain gestural links that connected my two selves. Life would have been too dissociative otherwise. I ate a little when I fasted, thought about Allah a little when I prayed, read a few sentences before I turned another page of the Qur’an, balancing my father and my mother, good Muslim, bad Muslim, a Catholic-style Limbo, not stricken, not saved.

When I pretended to have my period in order to skip prayers at the mosque, it was the idea of my cousin Madina, another of my Ammeh jaan’s children. Madina pulled me by the hand to the mosque balcony, and below us everyone prostrated, stood, sat, repeat, while we hung out in a couple of fold-out chairs, menstruating supposedly. Madina had been born in Afghanistan, then raised in Pakistan after her parents escaped the war, and now, at fifteen, a new arrival to the U.S., she was eager to figure this place out. She asked me about boys—I was her native informant, the explainer of local mores—how to act, what to say, what does this or that mean, should she call him back. Look, she said, pulling up her *tumban* to show me her legs, newly shaven, bare of hair, sexy brown smooth. All this I got behind, giving pointers as needed, but eventually Madina’s fearless disobeying of her parents left me in the dust. My cousin couldn’t be controlled. Even after she got caught sneaking out her window at night to meet up with an Italian boy (but not until she’d already done it a dozen times), and even after she moved into our house awhile to let her enraged father cool off, she liked to hum, behind her chadar, the popular hit “Bad Boy” by Miami Sound Machine. *Bad bad bad bad boy you make me feel so good*. Our parents had no clue about the words behind the melody.

My cousin Madina was the boy-craziest girl I ever knew, Muslim or



otherwise, the one who took the most chances relative to the liberties allowed. And I have no doubt, on Judgment Day, that Allah will give her an air-conditioned umbrella to share with that Italian guy whom she happily married in a two-tone ceremony, with a quiet Muslim exchanging-of-vows in the mosque's prayer hall, officiated by an imam, and a lavish, dripping-with-lace, Afghan-Italian reception at a hotel with crystal chandeliers and dancing till midnight. And I'm sure her fake-fasting mother, Ammeh jaan, now grandmother to two Afghan-Italian-American kids, will be there, on her way to Paradise. And I'll be there too. Even though today I tell myself that practicing yoga and meditation are fine stand-ins for my childhood prayers, and weekend juice fasts are satisfactory updates to the sacrifices of Ramadan, and sending checks to the local farm sanctuary is a version of *zakaat*. Because I've always been a better Muslim, and more Afghan, than I thought.

Anthology/Literature

"she stares at the world,  
takes it to the edge of  
all the words  
men weren't able to invent."

—Natalie Handal

