



PERSPECTIVES *for a*
DIVERSE AMERICA

Saffron Dreams

[Although her husband died in the September 11 attack, Arissa is targeted for being Muslim. In this excerpt, she is held up by a group of men who berate her and threaten to kill her until they realize she is pregnant.]

There were other looks I had been noticing, or perhaps that dreadful day had given me a heightened awareness of any kind of glance. After the first list of hijackers' names and nationalities was published, many Arab and Asian immigrants put up American flags on cars and shops, signs of solidarity laced with the hope of evading discrimination. It was a desperate attempt to show loyalty to a nation under attack. Immigrant cab drivers were spat on and ridiculed, and ethnic restaurants put up "God Bless America" signs after some were vandalized. With every horn or commotion on the street, they jumped, then withdrew a little more within themselves, guilt-ridden with sins they did not commit. They walked faster when alone. Some women took down their hijabs, afraid of being targeted, and adopted a conservative but Western style of dressing. Men cut their beards. Many postponed plans to visit the country of their origin any time soon. Those who did travel preferred to remain quiet during their journey and chose not to converse in their native language even among family members. A few close friends changed their names – Salim became Sam, Ali converted to Alan – in an attempt to hide identities. When asked their nationality, they offered evasive answers. We were homesick individuals in an adopted homeland. We couldn't break free from our origin, and yet we wanted to soar. The tension in our hearts left us suspended in mid-air.

I, too, had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks wanting to hurt, the accusatory side-long glances screaming silently, You did it, your people brought the towers down. My people? They were not my people, those few whose beliefs don't even reflect the religion they rely so heavily on to justify their cause. They wrecked people like me more than anyone, who come to this country to lead a freer, safer life, to live among a civilization unaware of the struggles of those who live in restrictive societies.

Is it money they are after? I wondered. A priest had been robbed at knifepoint in the same vicinity a few weeks back by two teenage boys. Mentally, I took stock of what I had in my bag: a chewed-up ballpoint pen, a notepad with "Arissa and Faizan Illahi" printed in cursive, a death certificate, a MetroCard, a \$20 bill, my ring that didn't fit me any longer due to pregnancy edema. My wedding ring! My heart pounded like a trapped animal's. I can't lose that! That's what I held close to my heart when ominous night shadows fell down around me in the dark and I look hungrily at each new one, hoping that one of them was Faizan's, that in death, he would visit me, if nothing else to say goodbye and to hold me close one last time. But how can one see an absence? Touch a void? Look for a form where there is none?

They were moving closer. I could feel it, and I tried to rush my pace. The muscles in my back tightened as I sensed their gained momentum, the footsteps matching mine. As I broke into a trot, a thin hand grasped my wrist. I spun around and faced the four teens. They looked at me with feigned crazed expressions. Now that they were face-to-face with me, they were unsure of their next move. I jerked my hand loose and turned around slowly to resume walking.

"Hey," the taller one with the dog collar called out to me, his voice laced with venom. "Stop or I'll slice you." I turned around slowly and subjected him to a steely gaze. To an onlooker, I am obdurate, an old structure under new management. The station was deserted. It was late. I realized the delicate situation I was in, but I was amazed by my own composure.

“What is it you want?” I asked in a stable tone. “Cash, credit card, food?”

They formed a formidable circle around me. The teenager in combat boots frowned at me and ran his sleeve across his face to wipe away saliva in a futile effort to intimidate me. I could smell their breath on my face. They had been smoking. I tried not to breathe it in. Secondhand smoking is harmful to a baby. Does it matter if the smoke isn't being blown in your face?

“Where is the good in you?” The blond guy suddenly moved in and grabbed my chin, cupping it in his palm roughly. “You race of murderers. How can you live with yourself?” He jerked his hand from my chin. I felt the rising ridge where his nail had scratched me.

“Me?” I looked at him in amazement and then laughed. It was more a product of hysteria. “You have no idea. I am as much a victim as you are.”

“Bullshit.” The blond guy spat in my face. I didn't brush the wetness away and looked him directly in the eye. I saw something shine in the hand he held behind his back.

“The veil that you wear,” he continued, pulling out his knife and aiming the point at my hijab. “It's all a façade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the nonbelievers, not us.”

I felt the thin veil rip as it came away from my shoulder. I stood waiting for the adrenalin to kick in, for panic to arrive. There was silence inside me. Knock, knock. No one was home. The pain in the young man's voice, though, was unsettling. It had the echo of a loss. I let him go on.

Next he moved the knife down my long black jacket.

“Where is your God now? Do you think He is watching?”

“You're a moron,” I taunted, my heart void of fear. “My religion does not preach terror. They are using it as a crutch to fulfill their own objectives. But you will never see that.”

The blond teen scowled but grew quiet as the knife in his hand moved down, forming a single long slit in the coat from my chest to my stomach, hardly touching the surface. I saw the look of surprise on his face as he went over the big bulge on my stomach and stepped back as if he had touched a live wire. I realized with a start that he had not been aware I was pregnant.

“Jesus,” he recoiled. “There's a fuckin' baby in there.”

The tall teen with the tattoo shifted his legs uncomfortably.

“Go on. Slice me,” I dared, my voice angry, now. “This baby's father died that day, too. I suffered as well.

“Shut up, bitch.” The blond teen moved in again, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, the knife closer to my throat this time, so close it itched where it rested. If I leaned toward it, I might bleed to death.

I was tempted.

“You lie—“ He teared up, stopped, and with renewed resolution look at the knife in his hand.

“Man, Jimmy, I can't do this,” the tall teen said, moving back.

Jimmy seemed to ponder his options for a split second before the sound of footsteps coming down the subway stairs caught him off-guard. Panicked, he dropped the knife. It clanged twice on the hard concrete before coming to rest. He followed his friends, who were halfway up the subway stairs by then. I heard a voice yell, "Hey!" followed by the sound of someone being punched and falling to the ground.

I collapsed onto my knees and closed my eyes from sheer exhaustion. A shock of pain uncoiled from my stomach and shot up my spine. I felt the restless flutter of my distressed baby and placed my hand on my cramping belly. It felt hard. There was a smell of dirty metal around me, rubber burning somewhere. My senses were suddenly heightened – or were they just now dying down? Bending forward in binding pain, I watched my torn black hijab. My baby, I suddenly realized with a rising sense of panic, heart drumming against my chest.

"Are you alright?" The man kneeling down next to me had chestnut hair and was holding his midriff with one hand and a briefcase in the other. I realized that in their hurry to get away, the young men had delivered some blows to this innocent bystander. My eyes had a hard time focusing.

"Shit," he cursed, glancing at his watch. A flicker passed across his face as he weighed his option. How important was I to him? A battle within his heart, his conscience his only witness. I kept drifting in and out of reality as I rolled over on one side.

"I have to go," he muttered apologetically and got up on his feet. "I am so sorry," he said before turning around. "I'll call for help." But would he, really?

I mumbled incoherently. His footsteps receded in the distance, and a few minutes later I heard other footsteps rushing in my direction just as a train pulled up in the station and bright, blinding lights illuminated my surroundings. Oh no, they are back!"

I mustered all the strength I had and screamed at the top of my lungs as my unused adrenalin finally kicked in. The two powerful hands that had suddenly scooped me nearly dropped me as I twisted and spasmed with all four limbs.

I can't lose this baby.

I have to get to a hospital.

A thought loomed large in my head suddenly as the fight went out of my body and my scream tapered off: How loudly did Faizan scream when death came for him? When the flames reached up to engulf him, what were his last thoughts? Were they about me, his unborn baby, or the life he'd never have?

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