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Prisoner of Darkness

I saw a wave of darkness coming toward me down the sidewalk - a shapeless, black form with a slit through which two eyes pierced. The eyes weren't watching me, and yet I felt they were following me; were, at least, aware of me. The figure walked fast, with a gliding, gently bouncing motion, like the loping of some wild creature, as the wind blew its robe like a black flame. The eyes seemed to gaze at a distant horizon. I briefly imagined a line of desert sand dunes, as in a scrap of old movie, a caravan of camels rocking as they paced over the crests.

It was hard not to stare: my eyes flicked back and forth between the black form and the sidewalk I stared at as if suddenly entranced.

Like everyone else, I'd seen images of women in full black veils on TV, in the movies, online. And the post 9/11 mantra of "Muslims are evil, Christians are good" had been drummed into my head so often I instinctively revolted ("Muslims are good, Christians are evil" had long been the yell of my inner rebel).

But, honestly, seeing the veils, head scarves, hijabs, chadors, burkas, whatever, creeped me out. What were they doing? Who, in truth, were these people? And why in the world would any woman want to completely hide herself? Unless her father, husband, brothers – her "men" – made her do it. And what kind of monsters did that to their women? Women could be difficult, and God help you if you got on their bad side (and who hasn't been, at one time or another?), but that was, must be, wrong.

She swept by me down the hot, white sidewalk, and I watched her lope away, with a kind of odd, touching majesty, to the next corner and, making a quick turn, her eye

a flash in black profile, vanish behind the Walgreens. And the dull, suburban afternoon swallowed the emptiness she'd left behind her.

If, at that age, I'd had any sense of the appropriate . . . but I often seemed to lack such a sense, at least according to my sisters. And I wouldn't want to disappoint them. So what did I do? Go back to my errands, or whatever I was doing in that part of town? No: I turned on my heel and marched to the corner she had just vanished behind.

She was no slacker, was already half-way down the block by the time I got to the corner. And I set off after her.

I've never been the kind of guy who "follows women"; "stalking" is not my style – but who knew if I'd ever see this woman again? After all, how many Muslims lived in Pratt? A few, to be sure: there was a mosque in an abandoned bookstore downtown, the street outside sometimes felt like a Christmas pageant, some days I half-expected to see camels and donkeys and goatherds. I'd seen the guys in kaftans and turbans and funny hats, and I'd even seen the several styles of scarves, and even once put one around my neck – but I'd never seen the full monty, what I sometimes called, to myself, the "prisoner of darkness" look. So I wanted to find out . . . anything more than I did. The internet would be no help here: information is not experience, not knowledge.

One thing I had noticed: the woman didn't seem afraid of anything. Maybe somewhat self-conscious: I wasn't the only one trying not to stare at her. But I saw no fear; she walked, princess-proud, goddess-serene, her black robes flaring behind her like great wings. She was a mystery. Maybe that was what caught me.

I almost lost her several times, when she disappeared around a corner and I had to sprint to catch up. I wondered, confusedly: was she allowed to drive and looking for her parked car? Or, not being allowed to drive, was she condemned to walk everywhere? And why was she out alone: weren't woman always supposed to be accompanied outside by a man from her family?

I reminded myself, this isn't Saudi Arabia, she can drive wherever she wants. But what if her men wouldn't let her?

America is half a wilderness: the laws of civilized life don't always apply here, and even when they do, it's sometimes with a wink and a nod. A man's freedom may mean another man's slavery. Or a woman's. After all, is there an actual law that a woman has to be allowed to drive if her husband doesn't want her to?

The implications spread out with nasty clarity. It was like the law passed in some city on the coast against sacrificing animals in religious ceremonies: they had to make an explicit law since the usual "no cruelty to animal" ordinances didn't always apply when a religious practice was involved. Then, once the law was passed, it had to be enforced. Who knew how many chickens were still being sacrificed in secret ceremonies around the country to protect the faithful from harm or ensure them protection from their gods, from their God? How would anyone know? The only witnesses would be the congregants. . . .

She turned past a church and slipped through the parking lot. I had to run to catch up, and when I did, turning too quickly at the corner, I halted, panting. She stood half a block away, under a willow, half-twisted around and staring at me. I couldn't see the look in her eyes, but the form, hunched over as it looked back, appeared angry, suspicious. I halted in my tracks and gaped moronically around me, one hand over my eyes, trying to

look lost, peering at house fronts as though looking for an address. I finally shrugged and stood, arms akimbo, as if unaware of the dark form. At last I let myself look back down the sidewalk. But she was already distant, hurrying down the tree-lined street, the black robe flaring behind her.

I hesitated a moment, crossed the street, and followed.

An SUV lurched out of a driveway and stopped, blocking my way and the view down the street. The driver, a middle-aged woman with chopped-off, badly dyed red hair, stuck her head out the window and hollered, and a pair of teenage girls wearing hip huggers straddling their pelvic bones and exposing their abdomens so low I cringed, half-expecting to see pubic hair, dashed into the back seat, shrieking "All right, all right, for Christ's sake!" and the SUV gunned into the street.

The woman in the veil was still visible, though hurrying beneath the trees, and I walked fast.

Empty parking spaces lined the street. It was unlikely they'd been filled anytime within the last week. Guess she's not driving, I thought.

Another corner, and she turned again, disappearing under the tree shade.

A dirt back-alley opened to my right, and I hurried down it, trying to catch glimpses of her between the houses. No luck. I started sprinting.

Within a minute or so I had reached the end of the block; then I ran across the street and walked carefully toward the intersection where she'd be headed. An old man with licorice eyes was walking straight at me, with a tiny white dog with licorice eyes on a leash. They both glared. Shit, I thought.

I gave a strained smile, and nodded.

"Nice day for a walk," I said.

He looked at me as though I had gone out of my mind and gave me a wide berth and weirded-out stare as he passed.

"Have a nice day to you, too," I muttered as he glanced back at me with wide-open eyes and broke into a limping trot. The bichon lunged ahead, straining at the leash. Jesus! I felt like shouting. Do I look like a house robber? Do I look like a terrorist?

No, but she does, I thought, as the woman suddenly appeared, walking into the sunlight like a ghost.

I turned and briefly followed after the old man and dog, then backtracked to the corner. But there was no sign of her. I looked up and down the four streets of the intersection. Nothing.

I had heard that certain cultures believed ghosts walked at noon, not midnight. It was now maybe 11:30. I didn't think of myself as superstitious, had even lost my weak, lingering faith in Christianity after taking a philosophy minor in my sophomore year at Pratt High. Still, I shivered slightly.

A fire truck passed leisurely down the street, no sirens, no klaxons, as though on its way back from a false alarm. Fire trucks had been carrying American flags for years, since 9/11, in commemoration of the firefighters who died that day. An over-sized flag waved heavily above the truck as it passed. It was torn in a few places and beginning to fade.

I shrugged and walked in the direction the woman had taken, vaguely east. Nondescript dwellings passed beside me, each with a small front-yard lawn and one or two trees, each with a driveway leading to a closed garage (it was midweek, most people

were at work or school) with a shrub at one side and a trash can shelter at the other, and a concrete walk leading to a small porch and a front door. A few yards had lawn ornaments; sometimes a hedge divided properties. I found myself looking carefully at the neighborhood, more carefully than I was used to looking at the similar neighborhoods I had grown up in. It looked strange to me – not in a repellent way, rather as though it had a presence I hadn't noticed before. No doubt it was because I was looking for something in it I knew was there, and hoped to see, but couldn't find. It seemed far from banal or shabby, frumpy and dowdy, as our town usually seemed. The locked doors, closed garages, drawn, colorless curtains, the sunlit lawns, the silent shadows speckled with sunlight beneath the trees, all of it seemed far away, secret, mysterious.

A trace of music came across the street: a Miles Davis riff from decades ago. I wondered who might be home today: a middle-aged non-PC housewife indulging a fit of nostalgia, a sick or malingering high school kid (like me, though I wasn't malingering), a wannabe musician daydreaming about the future. "So What" the music teased.

I stopped under an old tree that swayed out across the street as though to shelter it. Half the tree's boughs rose in gnarled arches, bare and black, toward a flat blue sky, the other half clutched a ragged umbrella of green just thick enough to baffle the sunlight. A yellow tape wrapped around the trunk; a plastic-coated sign was taped to the bark. It announced the tree's future removal at the hands of the local department of parks and recreation. There was a phone number to call if anyone objected.

Then I saw her again. She was on the opposite side of the street, her robes flicking behind her as she strode determinedly away.

Maybe she had stopped nearby. Maybe she had turned around and come back. Maybe she had dropped something off in the neighborhood and was now headed home. Maybe she had been waiting for me. . . . (I was prone to such thoughts at the time. And quick to believe them, no matter how much I lectured myself on the temptations of self-deception and the hopeless self-centeredness of my mind. In that regard I am not sure I have changed much.)

I headed toward the distant image, this time determined to follow her until I could no more: she'd end up in a building or a vehicle of some kind (I imagined everything from a semi to a helicopter), and I wouldn't stop until she had definitively exceeded my grasp.

I hurried forward, uncaring what spectacle I might be making of myself to whatever shut-ins were watching from the mysterious windows, lessening the gap finally down to half a block. I was panting, though whether from the energy expended in my pursuit or from the thrill of the chase, I couldn't have said, and took no time to ask myself.

By now we were nearing the edge of town, where a number of wealthier homes had been built over the past decade. They stood on wide lots of carefully landscaped yards, post-modern mansions surrounded by richly colored flower beds, glades of young trees, almost saplings, the occasional topiary; in one case a small fish pond gleamed in the sunlight, the corner of a tennis court peeped out from the back.

She turned into a winding road that led up a hill covered with trees – the older section to which the newer neighborhood had been added. I tagged along half a block behind, as she walked, with that gently loping stride I had first noticed, to the first turning and abruptly disappeared behind it.

I dashed uphill, drawing in deep drafts of the eucalyptus trees' sharp, medicinal smell by the time I reached the top. I was just in time: she had turned into the entranceway of a house obscured by a stand of the tall, peculiarly fragile trees. I stopped behind one of the bark-torn trunks: she was fumbling with a key in the front door. It opened and swallowed her inside.

The house was a new, elegant villa in stone, redwood, stucco, with half-moon windows and a wind-sail roof and a massive front door cut from what looked like a single slab of stained redwood, the whole set on steel struts on the overhang at the back, half-suspended over the edge of a ravine, with a deck that clearly had a magnificent view over the fields and pasture land to the west – something at once rich and reserved, half hidden as it was up this narrow road, with the nearest neighbors a hundred yards away, yet with a clear overview of the world it dominated.

It was the most elegant, modern house I'd ever seen, as more impressive than the McMansions in the plain below it as they were more impressive than the rows of nondescript dwellings of the rest of the town, one of which I had grown up in and not felt dissatisfied with until now.

I stood staring, scratching my chin, where the first sign of a beard had begun to show a stubble.

I was profoundly surprised. I had assumed a woman completely veiled would belong to an impoverished household that had somehow found its way to Pratt because San Francisco or L.A. was too expensive. I associated Muslims with terrorism at worst, with ignorance, backwardness and poverty at best. I couldn't imagine a Muslim of any kind living in a house, in a neighborhood, like this. Maybe in Saudi Arabia: not here.

She couldn't possibly live here, perhaps she was a . . . but what household would hire a veiled Muslim woman as a maid!

A curtain at one of the moon-shaped windows moved back: all I could see was a hand against the white curtain and a white slit in the darkness with a pair of eyes (I couldn't see them but I could imagine them), staring outside. She was looking at me.

She looked at me for a long time. I stood motionless by the side of the great, impatient, useless tree, staring back at her. No doubt there was a puzzled look on my face – my mind was blank enough. Maybe I was smiling.

I would have sworn she was smiling, too. A subtle, mysterious smile that said everything. And nothing.

But all I could see was a shape of darkness and a narrow band of white with two gray smudges, her eyes. How could I possibly know what her expression was? She could be glaring again at me.

How dare you follow me home. How dare you stare at me. How dare you . . . you infidel, you enemy of God . . . I will burn you in the hell of my gaze.

That was more likely. But I didn't think so.

I didn't want to think so.

Then the curtain fell back.

How could I possibly be certain what she had been thinking? Exactly. I had felt sure there was something there - curiosity? interest? even desire? - but how could I prove my feeling either way, right or wrong? The question nagged, stuck in my mind, like a little, penetrating hook.

I was already becoming aware of the traps self-deception led me into right and left whenever anything involving girls was concerned. That didn't mean I knew how to avoid them, of course, or even necessarily wanted to: I found nothing sweeter than daydreaming about improbable hopes.

Also, though I knew there were traps, I didn't always know how to identify them, or what the consequences might be once I fell into one. After all, would it be that bad? Finding out – the peculiar traps that seem to have been designed just for you, with perfectly targeted suffering, better designed than any internet marketing campaign – is what experience is about, I suppose. The world is full of shapes, some of which fit us perfectly. It can take a lifetime to learn which is a shelter, which a prison.

I walked home that afternoon, memorizing the way to the house on the overhang (as I thought of it) and daydreaming about the woman in the veil. I kicked myself more than once: how did I know she wasn't some middle-aged hag getting off on men flirting with a mysterious female? No, not likely: her walk was too light, springy As she walked, I had noticed how her robes clung to her, displaying the sharp, lean outline of her figure underneath. I grasped at straws that might tell me what she looked like. But my mind could only undress her so far. After all, what of her had I actually seen? A hint of eyes (I concentrated on my first memory, how she looked as she passed me on the street: the eyes were quick, the eyebrows dark, winged like ravens); her hands were white and thin, with long fingers, no finger polish, and there was the steady flash of black shoes, long and narrow, as she walked with that quick, agile lope. She herself was tall, almost my own height, and ramrod straight. No, this was no dowager Arabian queen.

Youth is no guarantee of looks, of course. My mind scanned through my classmates at Pratt High: crazed Maven enscrolled with tattoos, Georgia with the stringy hair, Palace who dressed for success every day of the week and had the forcefulness and charm of a tank, Patsy who at the age of 12 already looked like her own mother and who would never look any younger than 40. There were no mysteries there. The only girl among them who had interested me, Teresa Sallis, with her regal profile, eerie in its perfection, her pale coffee-colored skin I could have drunk from all night, had moved to Oregon the year before. She had attended school for only a year; would she still interest me if I saw her every day? She had been one of the quiet ones, reserved, soft-spoken, imperturbable.

But would she have dropped her shield in the end, become transparent? Would she too have gotten a Facebook page, become glued to her app phone, learned to tweet until everything anyone could hope to discover about her was known, and become as mysterious and desirable and beautiful and longed for as yesterday's newspaper, like every other girl I knew?

But at the moment I had a more pressing question: how could I see the woman in the veil again?

It was a moot point: nothing could possibly come of it. Yet I could not get her out of my mind: I kept analyzing my memories of her, few as they were, trying to make them add up to something. But there was nothing to add up until I had more material. To get that, I at least had to see her again. To do that, I would need to hang out in her neighborhood, which was difficult to do: I could hide for only so long behind a eucalyptus tree.

I cursed her wealth and her elite neighborhood. Why couldn't she live in a shabby neighborhood like the one the mosque was in, where I could hang out more or less invisibly?

As I was drifting to sleep that night, I got an idea. Early the next morning, I got up, put on my hoodie and a dark colored pair of jeans, and rode my bike to her neighborhood and, while passing her driveway keeled over and fell. I picked myself up, dusted myself off, pretended to give the bike a puzzled look, then took out a few tools I carried in the back pouch and applied myself to repair work, declasping the front wheel, unscrewing the derailleur, then the brake pads, and, laying out the parts beside the road, pretended to examine the bike while actually examining the front of the house through the bike frame under the hoodie's rim. Like a thief casing the house.

I could sit like this all day: if anyone showed up, I could make myself look busy. If she saw me, she wouldn't recognize me in the different clothes I was wearing. I'd be invisible to the neighbors for at least an hour or two.

I plugged into my iPod and listened to a rhumba medley while waiting. The music was obscurely dissatisfying. I wished I had something to listen to, like Lebanese fusion or Moroccan disco, with the snaking, lissome vocal lines, jazzy nasal krumhorn-like squeals, high-pitched drums; or maybe some Um Kulthoum, with her haunted wail, by turns piercing and caressing. . . . to bring me luck.

I was pretending to check the spokes on the back wheel when I thought I saw one of the window curtains – the same one I had seen yesterday – twitch once or twice, then pull back. A narrow triangle of darkness appeared, hanging suspended in the moon-shaped window. I continued to pull and poke at the wheel, plucking at the spokes as if they were the strings of a harp. They gave no sound.

Is it you? I thought.

I switched off the iPod and watched in silence. My ears rang; I had had the volume up way too high. I'll have tinnitus before I'm thirty, I thought. Then I heard my heart pounding. I hadn't moved in several minutes.

The curtain fell back.

My heart still pounded as I continued working away at the bike.

Go to the door, I shouted to myself. Get up and go to the door. Say your cellphone battery'd dead and you need to call home. Say anything, but get up and go to the door. After a few minutes, I awkwardly got up and pulled the cell from my pocket. I looked at it and scratched my head, trying to make my body language say, "Oh wow, the battery's dead." Then I looked around absently, looked at the house, and pantomimed "Wow, there's a house, I bet they have a phone I can use." I felt like an idiot, of course, but did what I must. Scratching my head again, and looking up and down the road, I began walking, as casually as I could, though my heart was pounding and my legs felt made of jello, up the drive toward the house, expecting, irrationally, that at any moment a rifle would poke through the window and start shooting at the infidel and trespasser, which, judging by my intentions, I, in fact, was.

If I were shot and killed while crossing the next few yards to the door, it would be no more than I deserved. Thid realization did nothing to calm my nerves. On the other hand, I was determined to go through with this: if I didn't, I'd never be able to look

myself in the face again. I remembered an odd piece of advice I was once given. It had rung with a cynical if brutal truth: sometimes the only right thing to do is the wrong one.

I walked up to the front door. From a distance it looked made of a single piece of redwood, but up close I saw a faint line running down the middle: a join between two almost perfectly symmetrical wooden slabs. The wood looked fresh, as if recently cut, and I could smell resin. I snorted. The first thing I'd seen of the house was something of a fake. The house was immediately less intimidating. I raised my finger and pushed the doorbell button, hard.

Deep inside I could hear someone singing, the long filigreed arabesque of an Arabian popular song from many years ago. I caught my breath. The woman, in her niqab (the night before on the internet, I had looked up the term for the full-length veil she had been wearing) was singing somewhere deep inside the house, perhaps as she knelt on a prayer matt and sang her heart out to her God. It ceased after a single cadence. Silence followed. I put my ear against the front door, then hit the button again. Again, deep inside the house, the mournful, enchanted cadence erupted and ceased.

A digital door-chime: who'd a-thunk? I shrugged irritably.

After another silence, I peered in through the narrow window at the side of the door: a curtain and the edge of a table pressed against the window; in the distance, just visible through the diaphanous curtain, the reflection of a window on a polished floor. I could smell paint; the house had recently been finished, and the new people had just moved in. She might be new to the country – "just off the boat."

I was probably wasting my time. But I had seen *someone* at the half-moon window. Maybe it was just the maid. These people could afford one. Or maybe she wasn't allowed to open the door to strangers, especially males. There was probably a camera somewhere, watching me.

I carefully walked back to my disarticulated bike. The house's façade once more regained its look of elegance, exclusiveness, money. And I wasn't so sure about the seam I had seen in the door. Had it been an optical illusion? Was I envious?

I was about to kneel down to reassemble the bike when I saw again the curtain at one of the moon windows move back. This time I didn't pretend I hadn't seen it; I stood straight and stared back through the oval opening of my hood, for a very long minute. I tried to penetrate the invisible shape watching me out of the shadows, remembering what I had seen the day before, the flaring black robes in the spring sun, the thin, long hands, the eyes that seemed to see me without looking at me, to draw me after them without awareness, almost inadvertently. Fatefully. Or so I imagined. So I wanted to imagine. Then the curtain fell back and the triangle of darkness, with its narrow horizontal strip of white and two smudges of eyes, closed again, and I became aware of birdsong and the sound of my breath as I exhaled.

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I cursed myself as I biked home. What had I gotten for my clever move? Nothing. I could hardly show up again in front of her house with a broken bike. I had no way of knowing whether my presence was welcome or not. And I still had no idea what she even looked like!

I resolved to think no more about it – about her, her damned veil, about whatever might be beneath it. She was probably ugly, fat and stupid. Well, she wasn't fat. But she might well be ugly and stupid. Hadn't I heard that many Arabian women in burqas were

kept illiterate by their men? What would we possibly even talk about? . . .

I imagined her standing in front of me, raising her hands to her veil and slowly dropping it . . . but her face was an oval-shaped blur, aside from the raven-winged eyes, staring at me mockingly. Daringly.

No, no, no, I told myself. Leave it alone. Drop it. Forget about it. . . .

And I raced my bike through the town to our small, shabby split-level in the part of town built in the ’60s, and beginning to show its age.

Over the next few weeks I kept myself busy, throwing myself into school and trying out for track, which had a few positions open for summer. I’d always been a good runner, especially in the one- and two-hundred meter. I got up each morning and jogged a mile before breakfast, and after school, trained for an hour with the team.

I started getting looks from the girls. And even the plain ones I’d sneered at all winter were starting to look good. Even Georgia. Even Patsy. A rumor passed through the team that Patsy was “giving” it away. At first I was disgusted. (One locker room exchange: “Yech - it’d be like screwin’ your own mom!” “Put a bag over her head and think about Maven.”) That lasted five minutes, then the hormones kicked in, and I started feeling tempted - if she was giving it away, what did I have to lose? Only my virginity.

One evening I stared at Patsy’s deer-in-the-headlights picture on her Facebook page. Her face – puffy and middle-aged-looking, cut off weirdly, showing one eye staring like a fish’s - practically shouted, “Take me! Please! Anybody!” I pondered the plaintive gaze of the seventeen-year-old MILF. Did I really want my first time to be a “mercy” (excuse the phrase) “fuck”? Please, God, do not do this to me. Do not make me do this. Do not make me *want* to do this.

And so I ran another mile before bedtime, across town to where it turned into ranch land and lettuce fields, then back downtown, past city hall and school, under the mercury lamps and the invisible stars. “Any-thing but Pat-sy, any-thing but Pat-sy,” went through my mind in rhythm to the jogging. The whole thing at the time seemed very funny. . . .

That happened on a Friday night. The following Monday a rumor flew through school that on Saturday night Patsy had been found half-naked and unconscious in a field in the south part of town, covered with semen stains. Another rumor was that she had nearly killed an attempted rapist in the Target parking lot, off Wapton. A third was that she’d been gang-raped after a party near the river after partying on ecstasy and coke. Whatever the reason - there was never an official story from school or the press, so the more lurid stories were unlikely – the middle-aged-looking junior who always sat in the front row because her last name began with “A” disappeared, and the front rows of her classes looked like they were missing a tooth for the rest of the term. The only thing certain was the ugliness of whatever had happened to her.

In the locker room, we were silent, staring at each other out of the corners of our eyes. Had any of us been involved? A gang of us? All of us? After all, every one of us had been thinking about “doing” Patsy for weeks.

Her Facebook page was removed. No one knew where she lived, but another rumor said her family moved to another town. I don’t remember seeing her again.

I had the strangest feeling after this. The thought of whatever happened to Patsy made me just awful. I hadn’t known her well, but I felt thoroughly sorry for the poor,

dim, ugly girl as I would for an injured kitten that had been abused. Yet, since I had, for a few hours, played with the idea of screwing her, I felt almost sick with guilt; it twisted my gut in a kind of spasm. I had done absolutely nothing toward the girl, we never once touched, even inadvertently - and yet I could not help feeling I had been partly responsible for whatever had happened to her . . .

I left the team a few weeks later, just before the end of the term. They were unhappy to see me go: they didn't have another "meter dasher" to replace me for the summer and would have to succeed on relays and milers. I left partly because I really wasn't sure one of our own hadn't been involved with Patsy. And staying there just made me feel even guiltier than, irrationally, I did.

I kept running, as the habit and the high had gotten to me: a mile in the morning and a couple at night. I ran to keep in shape, to touch the runner's high, to feel less guilty, to lock down the hormones.

One late night I was jogging down Addison, not far from the Valero station, with its sign for four-and-a-quarter gas. It was quiet out, with a light mist from the river, ghostly street lamps half hidden in the trees lining the street. I was just turning onto Garden when I was nearly blinded by an overly-bright pair of headlights coming from the opposite direction. Raising my hands to my face, I kept running; then the headlights shifted away – the car had just swerved, and a shadowy form appeared briefly and vanished almost immediately. The car gunned its engine and sped past. I stopped and gaped at a form swathed in black, just visible beneath the lamps in the mist, as it moved swiftly away down the pavement. I stopped and stared, my heart pounding.

It was the woman in the niqab I'd followed months before.

What on earth was she doing out at this hour? And alone? It must be unheard of for a Muslim woman of such orthodox piety, as she must be to dress as she did, to do such a thing. What would her men think? What would her men do if they found out? What would happen when she got home?

And I ran after her as she appeared and disappeared under the street lamps, moving ever further away.

At the end of Garden, she turned onto Wapton, past the brightly lit Target. I ran down the rest of Garden and slowed; I was just turning the corner when, as once before, I saw her. She had halted and turned around, this time fully, and was staring at me, this time a dozen feet away.

Shit! I thought, stopping in my tracks, startled, an instant later realizing I had given myself away.

Of course she had heard someone running behind her: the sound of my shoes slapping against the empty night street echoed in my mind as I stood there, looking ridiculous. If I had just been out jogging, I'd have run right past her, hardly noticing her in the brightness of the street lights.

"Why are you following me?"

The voice was guttural, hoarse, deep, slightly muted by the veil; though the question was demanding, the voice was soft. It had a strong accent, but the enunciation was precise and clear; far better than mine. The eyes under the raven wing eyebrows stared fiercely through the slit in the black. The skin around the eyes was luminous under the street lights, like milk.

As the voice spoke, the eyes didn't change expression, nor could I see the veil move. It was almost as though the voice were not coming from the woman at all.

"I'm . . . not . . . ," I sputtered, lamely.

"You followed me once all the way to my home. Then you rode your bike to our house and came all the way up to our front door. I didn't recognize you at first, hidden under your hood. Like a monk. The mystery monk on his bicycle! You think I do not recognize you now? Now you are a jogger! What other identities do you have? Maybe you intend to come to my front door tonight?"

I was taken aback by this outburst. There was a lilt in her voice that made the words sound almost musical, even when angry. I remembered hearing the ululations of Arabian women in movies, and wondered what the ululations of this woman might sound like: a caressing song, a fountain-like spring of sensual music.

"You speak English very well," I said.

"Thank you," she said, curtly. "But that is beside the point. Please stop following me."

I bent my head toward the ground, thoroughly embarrassed.

"I'm very, very, very sorry," I said as repentantly as I could. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

My look of overwhelming shame must have softened something in her, for she didn't immediately bolt, as I suspected she would. She continued standing there. I could feel her eyes staring at the top of my head.

"Aren't you afraid to run late at night? It must be dangerous."

I looked up, surprised by the question.

"I've never had any trouble. Not in these neighborhoods."

She paused.

"These neighborhoods can be the most dangerous. Their look of safety is a deceit," she said sagely, if somewhat stiffly. "You should be more careful."

I felt a little annoyed. Here she is, just off the boat – just out of a *tent* – and she's giving me a lecture on public safety in my own town?

"Well, I don't see you walking with an armed escort," I said.

She said nothing for a moment, then broke out in a musical laugh that went on for almost a minute. After stopping, she looked at me, the eyes in the slit softer, the eyebrows little arcs of amusement. She was smiling – oh yes, she was smiling.

"Well then, Mr. Stalker Monk Jogger, I will let you accompany me home, if that is your wish. That way we can protect each other from the dangers of the night streets. But there is one condition."

"And what is that?"

"I can let you know only when we get there."

I shrugged. She held all the cards, so if I wanted to tag along with the mystery woman, I'd have to accept her conditions.

"Won't it look bad?"

"What will look bad?"

"Your walking home with a strange man."

"You're more knowledgeable than I thought," she murmured after appraising my point, and lightly raising my hackles again.

"Well, you *are* veiled, so I only assumed . . ."

"Rightly." She stopped and looked closely at me. "I've irritated you. I can't seem to do anything right tonight. I'm sorry if I offended."

"No, no," I said, feeling nonplussed. "I'm not offended at all . . ."

She was silent for a moment.

"I just wanted to say," she continued, "that we will not be walking far beneath the bright lights of Target. And it *is* night." And nobody need ever know she walked home with a strange man and an infidel to boot. I could feel the smile had returned.

Charmed and mystified, I walked beside the hidden dark form down the brilliantly lit street. A block away, she turned, in that curious, long-legged lope of hers, into a shadowy side street and I followed close behind.

It felt strange and yet curiously pleasant to be walking beside someone whose face I had never seen. I only knew I liked the voice and wanted to hear more of it. The sound of our footsteps clicked quietly in the darkness. A gust of night wind stirred the trees.

"Have you been here long?"

"Here?"

"In Pratt. The states."

"Six months," she said, continuing after a pause. "I was in Boston before coming here."

"Did you like Boston?"

"Not much. It was very cold."

I paused. "Where are you from?"

"Are you FBI?"

"You've been questioned by the FBI?!"

I stopped and stared at her. She walked on a few feet before stopping and turning to look at me.

She said nothing, just stared back at me.

A rush of awful images I had seen on TV, the internet, of Abu Ghraib, Iraq, Guantanamo, raced through my head. Not *women*, I thought with a sick feeling. Maybe someone in her family . . .

"I'm sorry, it's just . . ." I quickly change the subject. "You're from Saudi Arabia. Sorry! Stupid of me."

She turned and began walking again, and I hurried to catch up as the musical laugh tinkled dryly in the darkness flecked with light from the street lamps.

"Close but no, I think the saying is, cigar?"

She bounced softly beside me.

"Time for me to be interrogator. How long have *you* been here?"

"All my life."

"You sound unhappy about it."

"Right. But I'm leaving as soon as I get out of school. Have you traveled much?" I suddenly asked, letting my inquisitiveness get the better of me.

"What is much? To England, Turkey, France . . . I spent a year in Germany."

"So what do you think of the USA?"

"FBI, FBI!" she said in a teasing tone.

"Sorry!" I cringed.

"I think your country is very strange."

“Me too. Very strange. And getting stranger. And I’ve lived here all my life. I sometimes think it’s not my country at all. As though I never lived here.”

“Things change too fast.”

“You’ve already picked up on that.”

“Six months, and my computer is already out of date.”

“Right!” I saw a woman in a niqab, with a camel and a goat tied up outside her tent, huddled over a laptop, cursing the latest version of Windows . . .

“I know I must seem very silly to an American,” she said. “The Arabian Nights . . . “

“Flying carpets . . .”

“Sheherazade . . .”

I thought.

“. . . Sinbad?”

“Ali-Baba!”

“The forty thieves . . .” I flashed on Robin Williams in the Disney movie from my childhood. “The genie in the bottle: ‘Wake up and smell the homeless!’”

“Tell me three wishes, master, and I’ll make them all come true!”

She laughed. Then we both laughed, and I thought she looked at me through the slit in her veil but, maddeningly, couldn’t be sure and could only guess the expression on her face. The swishing sound of her robes rose and fell beside me as our laughter died away.

A motorcycle gunned past us, with a young man in a black helmet and leather jacket and a girl with hair streaming from her own helmet blowing a maze of gold in the turbulent slip stream as she clasped him from behind. She was wearing briefs, with bare legs, arms, midriff, her back arched against the boy’s back, her knees splayed provocatively.

The woman at my side seemed to watch them intently as they disappeared down the long cavern of night trees.

She walked on for a time in silence. I had no desire to break that silence just yet, though I still longed to hear her voice.

“May I ask you something?” she said.

“Sure.”

“Why do American women despise themselves?”

I was dumbfounded by that one. I had no idea what she meant: none of the American women, girls, that I knew seemed to suffer from that handicap! Au contraire, mademoiselle!

“Do you know what I mean?” she asked.

“No, I . . . “ I said, not knowing how to answer.

“Yes, it’s true,” she said, as if annoyed at my thickness. “Like that young woman on the motorcycle. She was making a gesture of contempt. She was saying ‘I don’t care how I appear to you, because I despise both of us.’” She walked ahead a moment in silence. “It is only here that I sense that women, with all the freedom in the world, judge themselves with the most merciless self-contempt I have ever seen. I don’t see it even in Europe.”

“What about Arabia?” I said.

She shrugged, or seemed to.

“You haven’t noticed? Well, that’s okay.” She detached the syllables - “o-kay” - as though she wasn’t used to saying the word, or was trying out “taking American.” “You are a man, maybe only a woman can feel this. The American woman is so free - but they don’t seem to feel free.” She walked on, her head bowed toward the sidewalk. Rays of street light strobed across her veil. “Maybe because they are unprotected? Can you be free when you are unprotected? And if you are unprotected, how can you feel free? It looks like a kind of prison to me.”

“Is that why you wear a veil?” I said. The words came out without my thinking. I found what she said annoying, though I couldn’t say why: what she said seemed reasonable enough, maybe even true. But I felt as if some precious idea I had was under attack.

She seemed surprised at first, then she laughed.

“No! Of course not. I wear it because of my religion.”

“I know that,” I replied testily. “But I mean, aside from that.” I thought of something: “Did you *always* wear it?”

She didn’t answer immediately.

“No,” she said cautiously.

“When did you start wearing it?”

“FBI, FBI! . . .”

I walked irritably by her side.

“Well?” I asked again, ignoring her jeering.

“I only started to wear it after living in Europe.”

“France!”

“Liberté, égalité, fraternité! But no scarves.”

“And you resented it?”

“Yes!” Her voice rasped sharply. “Yes! Yes. They speak of freedom, but they mean only the freedom to agree with them. Like just about everyone else who shouts about freedom. I didn’t even wear the veil or scarf or anything. And so I . . . rebelled!” And she started laughing again. “Yes! And I discovered something. . . . I suddenly felt free.”

“You felt hidden.”

“Yes. Free.”

“Not free, just *hidden*.”

She repeated, disregarding me; softly, breathily, in a way I had never heard the word spoken: “*Free*. For the first time completely *free*.”

“Your father didn’t make you?”

“No,” she said. “The men in my family freaked out. They all want to be Europeans. At least they did then.”

“Then?”

“Things change.”

“So, it isn’t for religion?”

“Yes, it is for religion. For God.”

“Oh.”

I said that as if I understood, but I frankly didn’t understand a thing she had said.

The road gradually rose up a slope, toward a hill. I didn’t recognize the road or the neighborhood but I smelled the medicinal scent of eucalyptus trees, replacing the oak

trees and sumacs. The long brittle leaves rustled dryly as we walked. A gibbous moon appeared once or twice through a break in the trees. A bird with a song I didn't recognize – perhaps a migrator passing late in the season - whistled, lost or woken briefly in a temporary shelter. The street curved gently, masking the neighborhood ahead. We followed the curve, and the house with the overhang, a few windows lit, appeared, looking across a dark plain spotted with a handful of lights.

She stopped near the driveway entrance.

"I have to leave you here," she said, turning to me her dark, covered head. "Thank you for walking me home."

"Aren't you allowed to drive?" I blurted out.

"I'm allowed to drive," she said, with light mockery, and offering no other explanation, and turned to go, taking a step, then stopped and turned to look at me. She spoke softly, almost whispering.

"Please don't come back here again. It could cause trouble."

"Was that the condition . . .?" I said, more loudly than I intended.

"Sh! Yes."

Then she turned and walked toward the house. I took a few steps after her, and we were both suddenly flooded with light from a source just above the garage door. I was blinded, and imagined how I must look: no deer was ever more effectively caught in the headlights of a truck.

I thought I saw her turn to see me, give a slight cry – it was more like a gasp of pain (had she forgotten that the garage light turned on at any local motion?) – then dash toward the front door. I stepped back and squatted behind a fence post and watched as she disappeared inside the front door. A moment later the blinding garage light went out.

My eyes were still dazzled and I was blinking rapidly to clear them when I thought I saw the figure of a man standing at one of the upper windows, staring outside, it seemed, directly at me. Then that light too went out, and the house turned into a black square against the sky.

I rose cautiously, then, leaning over in a semi-crouch, keeping my head down, I ran back the way we had come, cursing the few weak street lamps that threw my shadow against the road.

"Who was that man you were with?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That man. The boy. He was hiding behind the driveway fence. He shot off like a scared camel!"

"I don't know who you mean. I walked home alone. He must have been following me."

He coldly stared at her.

"Following you into your bed . . ."

He walked over and slapped her head with his open hand.

Our conversation kept going through my mind as I oiled my bike the next day. Not just her words: her voice – subdued, slightly husky. And the words had been provocative, refreshingly incorrect (to me, anyway – maybe they were just the clichés of her culture . . .).

Yet many of the women I knew did seem dependent, couldn't really stand up for themselves; however brash they might pretend to be, they were easily cowed into parroting the current platitudes. Had she noticed many of the guys were hardly better, smug, ignorant brutes or silently resentful introverts? Was insecurity an epidemic - the "price of freedom" windbag pundits were always prosing about? Like being laid off eight times in a lifetime. Like being stuck in a middle class that had been steadily losing income since 1970. But how can you be "free" when you're wound up tight inside? What was it she had said about "freedom" – she hadn't felt so *free* (I remembered how she pronounced it, with an intimacy almost like love) till she took the veil.

I kept wiping the derailleur over and over as my thoughts wandered.

No, that wasn't the right phrase for it: nuns "took the veil." But wasn't it to become, to the rest of the world, a kind of nun, what she did, with other Muslim women in their burkas, chadors, hijabs? So: what if *that* was the real price of freedom – internal freedom: to give up – what was the word I kept hearing: "transparency." To become secret. To become hidden.

I stared into space through the spokes, remembering how the face of her house appeared through them that afternoon, many weeks ago.

I flashed on the last time I saw it, and how the night before had ended.

"Please don't come back here again."

She had known from the beginning the condition she'd be giving me. Vicious cat and mouse tease . . . Or maybe she hadn't known and didn't until the last moment, when she felt some danger sparking between us. She had felt something, then. Inside her: a danger to herself.

I've got to stop thinking about this.

I suddenly slapped the rag against the bike like a whip, and the bike tottered and almost fell.

I'd never seen her face: just the eyes, the eyebrows, the white skin. And yet I couldn't get her out of my mind.

Weeks passed, and summer burned across the valley.

One day it occurred to me, as the sun was sinking in a blaze of orange and gold toward the parched horizon and a far, cold Pacific: she had told me to stay away from her house, but she had said nothing about my stopping by other places where she might be seen.

I had begun reading websites about Islam, and I knew about the importance of Friday prayers. So I decided to take a chance, small as it was.

Pratt's sole mosque had opened in the local B. Dalton's after bankruptcy closed it. A sign, in Arabic and English, proclaimed "Al-Tawheed" above the entrance. The display windows were covered with layers of print hangings, and a new door, in wood with Arabic markings and a portiere behind it, had been built into the entrance. Through the open doorway I could see pairs of shoes lined up against a wall. There was a separate entrance at the back, down a narrow passage between the mosque and a neighboring pizzeria. Men, some in caftans and pillbox hats, some in khakis and stiff shirts, came and went through the front entrance; women in veils and scarves of many shapes and colors – some very bright, one or two even brilliant, most subdued, only one or two all black – moved furtively in and out of the passage leading to the back.

The mosque was curiously silent: just as I expected to hear bells tolling or pealing from the local churches at least once a week, I expected the traditional call to prayer of the muezzin from the small, unassuming building. But nothing came, not a sound. The men came and went, the woman too, without any external sign, as if they knew, subliminally, just what time to come. Of course, they might just be using their smart phones: no doubt, there was an Islamic prayer app. Five prayers a day, one major day of prayers a week, on Friday. And the timing of each prayer changed each day, depending on the sun's position in the sky or, for the predawn prayer, under the horizon. No Roman imposition of the will of man on the sky for these people! The varying orders of moon and the sun dominated the lives of Muslims, or so it seemed to me. It seemed sweet, romantic, crazy.

I tried to dress inconspicuously, though there was no hiding my sandy hair and beardless face from the more radically faithful. Then I walked to the mosque's neighborhood and, finding a convenient Subway kitty-corner from the mosque, parked myself at the window and watched the mosque about the time I calculated for Friday prayers. After half an hour, a handful of men dribbled in, including one in the regalia of a desert patriarch, with a thick, scraggly beard, talking vociferously and gesticulating to a knot of young men (no doubt students – "taliban") accompanying him. Then more men came, dignified, serious of mien, and a few young boys and teenagers with their fathers, not many in all. Only then did I see a handful of women sneak into the narrow passage and disappear self-consciously down the little dark defile - none the woman I was looking for.

The front door closed. After an hour of silence, the door reopened, and the men spilled out, chatting and looking refreshed and relaxed (they had loked stiff and serious when entering). Some stood scattered on the sidewalk, talking; the imam reappeared, still talking to his knot of students and ambled with them away after giving the other men a subdued, backhanded wave. At last the men dispersed, and only then did the half a dozen or so women appear out of the narrow passage, and after making sure the coast was clear of the men, walked, chattering freely among themselves, away, one or two leaving alone, their robes flicking in a breeze that had just come up.

I watched, disappointed, as the last of them vanished, and was about to leave when one of the women came back. She caught my attention as she stood in front of the mosque: her whole body expressed puzzlement, consternation. She kept looking up and down the street, looking for someone or something. I watched, wondering. Then, her head bent, she walked slowly away.

For some reason, I felt convinced she was looking for the same woman I was – maybe because she, alone of the women, had seemed, with her quick and flowing movements, as young as my mystery. She was also the only one wearing the niqab, though hers was brightly colored, pale blue and green.

The thought caught me, alarming me a little. Had the mystery woman been expected and not shown up? I tried to shake the unlikely thought from my head. But how could I find out for certain? I could hardly ask another veiled woman. . . .

I brooded about this, then went back again, the following Friday, to the mosque.

Again the men in caftans and stiffly informal dress entered the abandoned bookstore, again the imam arrived, expostulating among his eager young students, again the furtive women disappeared down the narrow chasm, again silence dominated the

neighborhood. I noticed the women in the flowery niqab; she had gone straight in, without hesitating. The mystery woman did not appear; perhaps she'd gone in earlier or by some other entrance. I watched tensely as the front door, closed for an hour, reopened, letting out the palely coffee-colored men, the imam, now alone and wrapped solemnly in his dignity, his turban-like hat giving a little swagger as he ambled away, the other men talking briefly, refreshed and relaxed after their prostrations, then dispersing; finally, the women dribbling from the dark cleft at the mosque's side. I watched impatiently, waiting. Two middle-aged women in chadors. Three very young women in colorful scarves, cheerfully twittering among themselves. Another group of women in long, lush scarves, their features vaguely Indian – perhaps Pakistanis. Then, at last, the woman in the bright niqab: a pillar of veil, pale scarf, and long robe fluttering in the quiet air. She stepped forward to the curb, stopped, looked around her, looking disturbed and uncertain what to do. Her head beneath its sky-blue veil twitched like the head of a nervous bird trapped under a scarf. She took a few steps to the front entrance, the one used by the men, then halted, turned back a step, and stopped again, as if paralyzed.

A few minutes later, a silver-bearded gentleman in baggy trousers and an Afghan cap - perhaps the mosque's caretaker - stepped outside, closing and locking the door behind him. The woman turned to him, her entire body expressing a question. At first he didn't seem to notice her, then, from her extreme stillness, a breeze stirring a corner of her veil on her shoulder, and her position directly facing him, he couldn't miss or ignore her: he raised his head and stared sternly at her, motionless. They stood facing each other, like two statues. Then the woman seemed to crumple; lowered her head and turned away. The caretaker finished locking the mosque door and, not giving her another glance, walked off with a frown in the opposite direction. And the woman, her head bent, crept away without looking back down the sidewalk.

I left my perch at the window and withdrew to the street to follow her.

She was small, slightly squat, but moved with surprising speed. I followed half a block behind, on the other side of the street. The hot air moved in random breaths of dust, a mist of splinters of glass, briefly obscuring her. The season of dust storms had begun.

I moved with her through the dust.

Half an hour passed as she moved swiftly ahead, her pale blue and green robes fading in and out of the dry gray-tan mist, myself close behind, biting the sand in my mouth, squinting in the gritty wind. We moved through a grid of streets, half invisible in the light dust storm, past homes, a supermarket, a school, then up a curving slope, a long, shallow spiral, and then she too ended before the overhanging house with the half-moon windows. She halted near the eucalyptus tree behind which I had hidden on my first trek here. I stopped a dozen yards behind her and slipped behind a trash shelter to watch. She seemed unsure what to do; then fumbled with her robe and withdrew what looked like a cell phone, staring at it distrustfully, as though it had often betrayed her in the past, then quickly tapped out a number and raised the phone to her ear. A few moments later she removed the phone and stared at it in despair. She turned back, walking a few paces to a break in the brush, and disappeared behind the greenery.

I'd pulled back to avoid being seen, and just caught sight of her vanishing, then walked rapidly to the brush where I'd last seen her. But there was no sign of her or a break in the green.

Brushing my hands through the bushes, I pressed back the leaves and branches, one of the branches scratching me: nothing. She couldn't have just vanished: there must be a path there. But there was nothing.

Had she even been there at all? The memory of the long walk in the blowing dust, the figure flickering in and out of sand-colored clouds, made me question my senses, my mind.

I shook my head: crazy thoughts. Of course she'd been there. She and the woman in the black veil: they were as real as the fingers on my hand. Except the women I couldn't grasp.

I walked back twenty paces and tried to get a view of the ground past the wall lining the road. At that point the hill sloped downward more gently than on either side, where the hill cut off and seemed to plunge. The path I couldn't find must follow the same slope: there is where the woman in the green veil must have gone. I had to find another route to the slope's base.

A hundred yards behind me, I'd passed a house under construction, so I walked back and snuck along the side of the house foundations, to the back. The slope was steep, but not a cliff, so, clinging to trees and bushes, I crawled down the thickly wooded hillside until the ground leveled out, then crept carefully back parallel to the road. At last I could see, through a screen of green leaves, the back of the overhanging house: more half-moon windows, the pylons supporting the overhang, white railings of an observation deck peering over my head toward an unseen landscape. And I saw a dirt path, perhaps created by neighborhood kids, or by hunters or animals long before the area had been built up, opening out from the underbrush and disappearing into another house construction site, this one apparently abandoned – perhaps from the recent housing collapse: vines, yellow buttons, poison ivy and oak, a variety of weeds, had overgrown the half-finished walls and unfilled holes where support walls were clearly meant to go. The wood frame for one wall stood to the right, like an unsolved cross-word puzzle, stained and aging from last winter's rains.

The wind had fallen. There was no sound in the summer noon heat, not a hint of bird song or breeze in the treetops. The sun seemed dead in the sky.

I walked softly (the silence seemed to rebuke any noise) to the foundation pit in the shadowless noon, and looked down.

A dirt floor, walls of broken rock, a heap of loose planks, a forgotten hammer and saw blade, a plastic soda cup, scattered nails, a cement bucket, in a corner a black cloth, crumpled in a pile.

A rotting wooden ladder stood against the pit wall, and I carefully lowered myself to the bottom.

I approached the black cloth and pulled it till it spread evenly over the ground. There were several layers, what looked like a veil and a scarf and a robe-like dress, all black, but pale now with dirt, dust. One of the layers, along one side, had a narrow rectangular slit, as for a pair of eyes. Another had a long, jagged rip, as though cut with a knife; a brown crust stiffened the tear's edges and the nearby fabric. I raised the crusted fabric to my nose and sniffed. It smelled like rust and blood.

I looked furtively around the pit: it might have been an unfinished basement. I felt the blood pounding in my ears. At first I didn't realize what I was looking for.

The dirt ground, cemented in one corner, near the mixer, showed no signs of disturbance, of having been dug up or tamped down. No signs of a grave. Unless, of course, it was under the cement.

A twig fell to the ground near my feet. I jumped and looked up; a tree bough hung between me and the sky. The sky looked down at me in a huge blue square, a frame of a photograph in which I had been caught, off guard.

I scrambled up the ladder, then stood at the pit's edge and looked back down. The sheets of black fabric lay, spread out, in the corner, like a wave of black sheets on a pale, rumpled bed. I debated whether to go back down and retrieve them, or put them back in a pile, as I'd first seen them. . . . No, I'd better just get out of there.

I glanced around the abandoned construction site, then, finding the path through the bushes, walked, fast and quiet, hunched over, up the slope through brush and trees, to the road above.

I had no reason to believe the pile of black fabric belonged to the woman in the veil, or the rips had been caused by the stabs of a knife, say, the result of a murder, a killing . . . maybe an honor killing, because another man had touched the sacred skin of one of the family's women, looked at her lustfully, raped her, or – who knows? – had merely asked her the time of day. If she wore the niqab, imagine what more her men might require of her, whatever her denials? There's no predicting what will set off a male's rage, or where it might lead, once launched in all its ludicrous and terrifying bloodlust: as long as it ended in the absolute security of his dominance. And where else could that be but in the right of life and death? And if that was challenged, there was only one way to enforce it. Not by threats.

I tried to shake the suspicion from my mind: even the crusts of red might have been caused by something perfectly explainable and innocent – as innocent as anything might be these days, when just taking a breath of air might involve a crime happening a thousand miles away, ten years in the future, a massacre a generation ago. What was it about their culture that kept alive wounds unhealed for centuries, for a millennium and a half, and made them flagellate themselves to remind their God of the callousness of his creation? We had just celebrated a new millennium by promising ourselves to forget the old pasts forever. And we were rudely awoken one morning by a culture that forgets nothing, forgives nothing, remembers and punishes forever . . . But my imagination was running away with me.

I went about my summer – my job at the pool, laptop parties with friends, weekends at Tahoe, hanging out in clubs and casinos, watching girls get drunk online and off, throwing themselves at every guy in sight, even sexting me (the guy they wouldn't talk to the rest of the year in Pratt), and becoming increasingly disgusted. The memory of the woman in the veil and of the black garments at the bottom of the pit ran obsessively through my mind.

One evening, as the late summer light lingered above the rosy haze of the valley, I went back to the abandoned construction site. Everything looked exactly as I remembered: the same crusted wheelbarrow and overturned buckets and winches, the same splayed stacks of lumber, everything now overgrown with vines and flowering weeds; the holes for wall supports, the single, weathered, cross-word wall frame in profile against the wild brush, the square foundation pit.

I walked to the edge of the pit and looked down. The lumber and cement bucket seemed untouched. There was a rat hole in one of the corners that I hadn't noticed before. The leaf twig still lay on the ground, like a gnarled, green hand. The ladder had been withdrawn. The black garments had disappeared.

I explored more of the site. In a back corner, near a formless patch of sweet-smelling juniper, I found a trash burner, poked with holes and black with charring, inside it a pile of white ashes. Combing through the ash, I discovered a few shreds of black, unburned fabric. The fabric was wet, as with dew. I looked more closely at the ground near the burner; it had been dug up crudely. A stain of red liquid had soaked into the soil, and it seemed someone had tried to hide it – the trash had been dragged to cover the stain, unsuccessfully; ashes had been brushed over the earth around it.

A scene came abruptly together in my mind.

Had she been killed here, buried here, her clothes burned here? I explored the site in greater detail, looking for more signs, perhaps a grave. But nothing more came up, nothing strange or suggestive. All I had was a pile of ashes, a red stain, some shreds of burnt black cloth, a vague suspicion. And a few memories of someone I had never actually seen, and had heard only a few words from, spoken in the dark. Had any of it happened? Had she ever existed?

Of course, there was also the other niqab woman, who had led me here without knowing it. She clearly suspected something.

I had found the path through which she had disappeared from the roadway up above. But what if she hadn't been headed toward the construction site at all but was looking for another way into the overhanging house, at the back? I walked along the side of the site facing the hillside. A few half-beaten paths headed up the slope, but they ended, I soon found out, in stony outcroppings or dribbled into patches of thorns, a fallen tree over a dried-up creek, an ancient shed entangled with spider webs. The house hung high above me, a black squared-off shadow above the trees, its pylons plunging into the undergrowth. It looked from here like it would only be a matter of time before a hard rainstorm washed away the dark brown cliff on which the house was precariously perched, and slipped the whole post-modern edifice into the valley beneath it – maybe even on top of the abandoned construction site, burying it in once-stylish rubble. But there didn't seem to be any direct path from here to there. Anyway, my suspicions were probably unfounded, a product of my imagination on overdrive because of a mysterious female.

I found the path to the road and began, with a sigh, half-relieved, half-disappointed, the walk back up the hillside.

The shoe – more like a slipper – in dark blue lay upside down, caught in a root at the side of the path. I reached down, raised it, turned it over in my fingers. It was for a left foot, a woman's shoe, long and narrow, with a worn heel, and damp inside, where the form of a sole was clearly impressed. There was no brand, no size. It was slightly weathered, lightly crushed. It smelled of cut grass.

I tried to remember the shoes of the woman in the veil, but nothing came to mind: only the steady, bouncing lope of her walk, but of what had flashed rhythmically beneath the hem of her black skirt, nothing.

Behind where I found the shoe, a thread-like path led into the weeds. I crept slowly along it, still holding the shoe. It was barely a path, and at times I thought I had

lost it, as it threaded steadily, steeply, upward between bushes and trees. An occasional bird woke in the hot afternoon and twittered sleepily. Then a shadow cut off the sun, and, looking up, I saw I was directly beneath the overhanging house. A few feet ahead the bushes ended in a cluster of sandstone rocks and hardened clay, and the path vanished in a patch of dust.

The pylons holding up the house flanked me on each side; a rough staircase cut into the cliff led to a yard above. A window had been cut into a corner of the white surface just over my head; it was shaped like a faceted dome. As I looked, I saw a face peering down at me.

For a long minute, we gazed at each other. I could make out a pale oval with blurs that signaled eyes, a mouth. The face broke into a grin. I was looking at the face of a young Arab man about my own age. The grin broadened as we watched each other. Suddenly he grimaced – or laughed? I couldn't tell - and lurched, or was yanked, back from the window, now a dark, faceted octagon, like a mailed fist that had been punched into the flatness above me. I felt as if a caterpillar had just crawled up my back.

Frightened, I ran down the trail, around and back up to the road, and left as fast as I could without drawing attention to myself. I crushed the slipper in my fist as I ran.

Back at home, I lay back on the bed in my room and stared at the ceiling.

Had I seen the results of a murder? And if I had, was the victim the woman I was looking for? Did the woman in the sky-blue veil suspect the same thing? And how could I know the answers to any of these questions?

The second question should be easy: find the missing woman; once I saw her alive, I'd know my discoveries were freaks. And finding her should be easy, in theory: I "knew where she lived."

I'd need to set up a stakeout. For obvious reasons, I couldn't be there, watching all the time. So: how could I spy on the house 24/7 without being there or being seen?

I had learned from my trig class that the first step in solving a problem is to ask the right question. You're half way to the answer once you have that. But it must be the right question, and you must let it sink in like a hook into a fish's mouth, and wait for it to catch, before you pulled.

My friend Josh was a computer geek, unlike myself. I called him on my cell after half an hour of staring at the ceiling.

Hooking up the webcam was a piece of cake. Josh and I snuck up past midnight a few days later, wrapped the cam against a tree trunk with black duct tape, using Josh's iPad to aim the lens at the house's front door (we could focus it with unnerving ease anywhere wifi-able – Josh hacked into a local node; maybe the house's router – brilliant!), and left half an hour later, after camouflaging the camera with an accommodating frond of eucalyptus leaves. The only creature that noticed us was a dog, yapping at us, for form's sake, in a neighbor's backyard as we hurried off. Inside Josh's Mini Cooper parked a few blocks away, we switched on the cam from his laptop and watched the house as it slept.

"Voila," Josh said with a mellow snicker as he adjusted the focus. "This babe better be hot, dude."

I had told him as little as he needed to know to get his enthusiastic cooperation, and grunted assent.

"Too bad you don't know which window is her bedroom." He clicked on the record button, and yawned. "Okay, Stalker Man, now maybe we can sleep."

There's no point in laboring this. It was not a success: our tireless Cyclops stared futlilely for a week at the moon-windowed façade; the front door opened occasionally to let in or out a stout mustached man in khakis and a polo shirt, two boys in striped shirts and jeans (maybe one of them had been my watcher in the skybox), a heavy old woman in a chador. I thought I saw the head of an old man in a white pillbox hat groping at one of the window curtains and peeking out once or twice. At 7:30 each morning, a silver Echo drove out of the garage with the killjoy light, and returned at quarter to six each night, the lone passenger the driver, a hunched, bulky male, glimpsed briefly behind the windshield glare. The lights in the window turned off at the rising of the sun, turned on for a time after its setting, turned off again as the night thickened. But there was no sign of the woman. Nor, frustratingly, was there any sign of disturbance, of trouble: the household seemed disappointingly average, desperately ordinary, curiously inconspicuous despite the man's foreign mustache, the old man's white cap, the woman's peasant-like scarf. As though working at it, self-consciously, careful not to draw attention or give occasion for remark. Of course, maybe there was a whole sleeper cell of jihadis hiding inside.

For a week I watched the daily round: the Echo left each morning, returned each night; the two boys walked out with their backpacks, possibly for day camp (a bus perhaps stopped nearby; a yellow streak smeared across the screen not long after the boys had left the monitor image, at a trot, in the morning, and crossed it again in the afternoon just before they reappeared, trudging toward the front door), and the old woman sometimes appeared out front, clipping a hedge between front door and garage or sweeping the walk leading to the road. Once she looked toward the cam, seemed to notice something, looked more intently, and I wondered if the sun was gleaming off the cam's lens, betraying us. But then something shook the image and shuddered, black and immense, across the screen: a huge bird shape flapped in silhouette toward the house, shrinking as it rose toward the roof where it perched, a crow, and opened its great black beak in as caw we couldn't hear. The old woman watched it and made a sign against evil spirits as it swept, ponderously, above her head, briefly touched the house, then flapped out into the air above the abandoned construction site at the back.

That was about it.

Frustrated, I returned to the Subway across from the mosque, hoping to find the woman in the niqab of pale green and sky blue. Maybe I would approach her, ask her . . . though her own evident fear of talking to strange males I could feel infecting me. But fear turned out to be as futile as hope: over the following Fridays, there was no sign of her either. The men piled into the front door, the imam entered with his students, the few women skittered down the dark defile next to the pizzeria; an hour later, they left, the men, the students, the imam, adjusting his robe, his hat cocked back above a dignified, self-conscious frown, the women withdrew from the defile into the light and scattered like worried birds, the caretaker closed and locked the massive front door.

The next day, Saturday, I went back once more to the abandoned construction site. But it looked as though someone had cleaned it up: the trashcan with the ashes had disappeared, the earth beneath it and around it had been dug up and turned over, like the soil in a garden. The planks at the bottom of the foundation pit had been removed, also the cement buckets. A burst of weeds had grown through the wall frame and threatened to bury it in green by the next year, or at most the following, at the same season. The dust was dry from the parched summer and blew into the air at the slightest breeze. There was no sign of the black veil.

It was as if she had never existed, had been wiped from the face of the earth, was no more than a handful of dust.

……

The rest of the summer passed. I tried to forget about it – the woman, my unprovable suspicions, the "evidence" and its removal from the construction site – but I was haunted by them: memories, half-memories – of the veil covering a mysterious, seductive form, of the slit where I had seen a pair of eyes I couldn't read and two raven-winged eyebrows, of the white, narrow hands at the ends of her sleeves, of the curious lope of her walk, the few words I had traded with her that night, her startled silhouette against the brilliant garage light, of her final look back at me before she ran to the house and vanished behind the heavy front door with the crack down the middle of it. The men's blurred face I had seen at the windows of the house – the front window, the strange observation window in the floor at the back. The unbuilt house and the black sheet-like cloths with a blood-like smell on them, the ashes in the trashcan, the dark blue slipper. The slipper was the only concrete evidence I had – I'd kept it, hidden in my locker bag in my room – and I wasn't even sure it belonged to the woman. All I had was phantoms. Eventually, over the following months, they faded, only coming back whenever I saw a veiled woman on a TV news program or website. I almost forgot there were any Muslims in Pratt. Or I thought I had.

After going back to school at the end of August, I discovered I'd acquired an extreme distaste for the flesh that the girls I knew exposed, the blatant openness, an openness I didn't believe in, that I had come to suspect. I had to work to hide my disgust whenever I saw them: they seemed disrespectful, arrogant. It was like a gratuitous insult, but more than that, despite its pretense of frankness, candor, "honesty," it seemed a kind of lie. My reaction surprised me, then worried me: hadn't I seen these things for years, hadn't I grown up with them, what was this "violent rejection" so deep and sharp as a reflex I felt myself almost blind with anger? What was going on?

It took me while to realize I'd actually felt this way for a long time, as long as I could remember thinking about it, but I had kept my thoughts, my feelings, hidden – they were, in a vague, obscure, even frightening way, unacceptable, wrong, possibly evil; unacceptable to my peers, even to my parents and their generation – so much so that I could barely acknowledge them to myself. Yet I felt that the girls I knew – the girls I might want to date – were throwing something away of immense value, without knowing it themselves: were willfully destroying something they would never be able to create again. Something that seemed to violate a law of dignity, of honesty, of truth and beauty and good. And I felt—again, obscurely—that they injured, not only themselves but each other as well, even the next generation of women. And people like me.

I questioned myself furiously: was this some kind of sexism in me, a return of the drives of "patriarchy," something like a demonic possession by ideas that opposed the dominant consensus – a consensus I had always thought I'd agreed with? But what if I didn't agree with it? What if, at the bottom of my heart, I opposed it and everything it stood for?

The idea, frankly, scared the hell out of me and tried to stop thinking about the problem. What the hell am I becoming, (yikes!) a Republican?

But I was immediately ashamed of my fear.

What was the matter with me?

I tried to think this through carefully.

What was this consensus I felt myself opposing? And what particular ideas?

The particular ideas: complete free self-expression for women, in my case, for the young women I knew.

And what was that based on? It seemed to me based on the idea of political correctness, a liberal (and, I felt, libertarian) consensus that seemed to pervade the society I knew. Yes, there were isolated objections to that consensus, among Christian fundamentalists and some "neo-conservatives," but I rejected the ideas those objections were embedded in. If anything disgusted me even more, it was neo-conservatism and Christian fundamentalism.

So: as I understood it, I was objecting to political correctness. But what was *that* based on? Political liberalism. And the essence of that seemed to be to be willing to doubt any and all received wisdom, and think through things, especially hard ones, for yourself.

So what about doubting *liberal* ideas and the principles on which they were based? I had taken these ideas in with my mother's milk, at home, from TV, since kindergarten. Nobody questioned them. Especially the ones regarding girls, women . . .

By putting liberal ideas (for example, the ones about women, girls) on the hot seat of questioning and doubt, holding them up to the highest standards of proof, wasn't I giving them the highest possible honor, in their own terms? After all, it wasn't certain they wouldn't pass the test – it would just guarantee that no one could take them for granted, and every time they were raised, they would have to go through the same trial, over and over again.

This train of thought gave me a sense of exhilaration. And I went on.

Weren't liberal ideas based on rights – civil rights, human rights? And how were those rights won? By fighting for them.

What about my own rights?

So what, if my ideas were "unacceptable"? What if they were "bad ideas" that might make me despised by many I knew – what if those ideas reflected me, were my convictions, beliefs, my truth? Wasn't it incumbent on me to find out if they were, and if they were, to embrace them fully as my own, as part of my essence, and to express them, to articulate them (to use the pompous fashionable term), without fear, fight for then and defend them, and not let fear of rejection color what for me was an essential truth?

These ideas, feverish enough, questionable and half-baked, knocked back and forth in my mind. Maybe – maybe not! What was "truth" anyway? What was the self? Some philosophers claim there's neither "truth" nor "self." So, if I couldn't be sure, maybe I ought to keep my seditious thoughts, my heretical opinions, my "rebellion," which found a home in factions neither left nor right, liberal/progressive nor

conservative, neo or otherwise, to myself. Until I was certain, or at least less uncertain than I was. Though that might be never.

This intense inner debate, which had the effect of leaving me back where I had started, goes to show how liberal I continued to be.

So, with all my commitment to skepticism toward myself and goodwill toward others, my mind remained in a turmoil of irresolution and doubt.

The doubt was like a poison. Or like a medication with dubious side effects. Once I saw something as doubtful, it soon became wrong, and I could no longer trust it: its arguments, its reasoning, fell flat. The very things I had been taught by people I respected, things I had come to assume, as things unquestionably beneficial, even as good in themselves, as essentials to a good life for an individual and for society as a whole – freedom, democracy, transparency, openness, no boundaries, no borders, no secrets – these very things suddenly began to seem demonic, steeped in destruction, madness, and death, the values of an insane arrogance, a pitifully insolent finger poked by an insect at the face of a god, a god that at first laughed forgivingly at the tiny fool but would eventually teach the insect a lesson it would never forget.

I felt appalled at what I took to be the grotesqueness of the human race – of the state of its soul and the underpinnings of its mind. Of course, the obvious reply – that it was my judgment that was arrogant, dishonest, and grotesque – was not far from my thoughts: who was I to condemn my world, which had created, formed, which had *made* me? Then I again remembered the principal imperative of my world: doubt everything, to think everything through for yourself, for *myself,* follow the argument wherever it may lead . . . Very well: what if by doing so my mind led me to condemn the world that had spurred on my autonomy? It was the risk my world had taken: it was a risk that I was taking. If I rejected it, I must expect it – despite its creed of tolerance – to reject me.

I had begun the steep road to where I now breathe - a thin mountain air - dizzy and anxious as I look down toward possible valleys of refuge.

A year passed. I was up to my neck in studying, in tests, SATs, college applications, the senior prom, graduation. I hadn't returned to track – there was no time, and everyone seemed to have forgotten Patsy – but I still jogged twice a day. It was June again. I had graduated respectably enough – no awards but no dishonor – I had gotten into two of the four universities I had applied to (the backup and my least favorite), and I was preparing to go to Washington state for a summer job on a fishing boat. I was taking an evening run in a novel direction, and after half an hour found myself near the sloping road I had discovered when I first followed the woman in the veil home.

I hesitated a moment, then jogged up the road toward the house. Near the driveway I slowed to a walk, taking deep, heaving breaths, and looked my fill at the house. Nothing had changed – well, the hedge was overgrown; maybe the old woman was incapacitated or too tired to trim it. One of the moon-shaped windows was lit in the early evening. The sun was setting behind a flotilla of immense cumulus clouds, bright in an array of pinks, mauve, violet, green, beneath scrapings of high-ice, stressed-looking cirrus; the sun glancing out in brief, sharp, futile glares as it sunk, flattened, and disappeared behind the horizon.

Across from it, the moon rose, orange, then pink, then white as an egg, then floating off into they sky, enormous and close, like a sad and astonished face.

I looked for the break in the brush, soon found it (it was almost overgrown) and walked with a quick, quiet tread down to the construction site. The site was now entirely overgrown: a growth of weeds covered the piles of lumber and crawled over the wall frame and filled the foundation pit almost to overflowing, The fecundity of the valley had never been made so graphically clear to me. If I hadn't known better, I might've thought there was nothing manmade here at all, nature had so completely overgrown everything: tools, frame, lumber, equipment, even the outlines of the pit had been smoothed into what looked like a natural depression. The air smelled of weeds, wild flowers, earth, grass, bark, evening damp: a green, druggy smell – breathing it was like dreaming awake. I heard the call of some rare bird, resting here on the way north. A late bee hovered with heavy dutifulness over a tall yellow blossom. Long cat tails and a camp of ferns competed for the margin around the pit.

I stayed till the shadows had entirely swallowed the site.

Coincidences invariably come in groups, so what happened a few days later probably had no significance. So I tell myself.

Long before now, I had returned to my girl-watching habits. Pratt was not a rich playground for this, but it had its advantages. The girls might actually be approachable, unlike in the big cities. I had once spent a long weekend in San Francisco: what the girls had in looks they made up for in . . . maybe "detachment" is the word. Unless the rumors that most of the lookers there weren't into guys were true. That idea at least consoled my dinged ego. They sure didn't have much time for this innocent from the Valley.

I still had a week ahead of me before flying to Washington, where I would spend the summer trawling for salmon, herring, steelhead, outside the Sound for a week at a time and sleeping in the belly of a creaking fishing boat between the ocean and the galaxies. There might be some women in the crew, though probably not my type, and there would always be weekends in Seattle: the women there had a nicer rep than in Frisco. Maybe the long rains and the flannel-gray weather made them mellower . . . That part of the country is technically a rainforest (I learned): I thought of jungle growth, lianas, giant lotuses, screaming monkeys, in a dank mist slurried by downpours of cold rain . . .

I was in downtown Pratt for some reason, waiting for a bus near the Walgreens, when someone – a woman, naturally – caught my eye. She was a little under my height, in her early 20s maybe, with short black hair, slim, and broad shoulders, a large diamond-shaped chin (like Grace Kelly's, I thought later), a little ski-jump nose, long white hands at the ends of a fashionable, horizontally striped, black-and-white long-sleeved tee. She was wearing a crisp pair of dark blue jeans and open-toed sandals. A beat-up bag was slung on one shoulder, and she walked with a marked, almost masculine swing of the other arm. Her eyes were dark with concentration under black raven-shaped brows.

I watched with vague curiosity at first, then stronger interest, as she reminded me of something. My reaction puzzled, then intrigued me. I had never seen her before, I was sure – in fact, her whole manner, body language, motions, posture, seemed unlike those of any woman I knew: they were mixture of caution and defiance, suspicion and a kind of muted swagger. She stared straight ahead as she walked, as though aware she was being watched but refusing to acknowledge it. Then she saw someone, stopped, and waved, a big toothy smile opening in that noble jaw, at first I didn't see who to, as a grocery truck

passed by. Then, as she dashed across the roadway, I saw him. It was the stout mustached man, again in khaki slacks and a Polo shirt, who I'd seen on the webcam aimed at the overhanging house almost exactly a year before. The woman ran up to the man and stood cheerfully chattering as he watched her with head bent and a slight frown. My first thought was a cynical one: the replacement, naturally. But as they stood talking, another idea crossed my mind.

A few minutes later, man and woman parted, and the woman, now across the street from me, began walking away. As she strode off, I raised my arm and covered her image with my hand, then pulled my hand toward my face and extended a single finger, covering her image until all I could see was the very top of her head and her feet as they walked. She walked in a bouncing lope down the street exactly as I had seen the woman in the veil a year before. I caught my breath.

It was her – it was her - the same woman, though now without the veil.

I stared at her as she walked away, eventually disappearing in the distance in a welter of traffic, other pedestrians, street signs, heat waves rising from the burning ground.

So: after all the woman wasn't dead, murdered? Or was this someone else, the bounce of her step a coincidence – what did I know, maybe it was the way young women in her culture walked, a provocative, smiling stride to make up for the secrecy that swathed their bodies? Just as young American women often switched their hips, at first deliberately, later unconsciously. The more I thought about it, the less certain I became. But I wasn't likely to find out. A few days later I was on the plane to Seattle.

The summer was only a little harsher than I expected: fighting the swells from the Sound into the Pacific and back as we hauled in netfuls of fish and kelp and multifarious sea creatures into the belly of the little fish factory ship, "The Raving Betsy," working the galley in the morning, scraping fish scales and torn-off fins from the decks and cleaning seaweed and human trash from the winches most afternoons, sleeping nights in hammocks sodden with salt spray and muggy with sweat, eating TV dinners and cappuccinos in cans, trading dirty stories with the regular fishermen, learning the lore and the slang and the hardness of the life I would do my best to make sure I'd never have to taste again once I graduated. On weekends we berthed in Seattle and I'd flash my fake ID at the complacent bouncers around Pioneer Square and cat on the roofs of the Old Town's clubs, soaking up the local vibe and the Seattle sound ("the sound that made Kurt Cobain great"). The Seattle ladies were sweet and funny and fresh and grooved to my landlubber's fresh-out-of-water fish tales, even if nothing clicked for more than an evening, and by next weekend the tide had swept them out to sea. They were too easy and too hard, like squid vanishing, after a brief shining, down the tide. Yet I couldn't shake the patch of darkness that had returned to the back of my memory. The summer was a collage of wind-swept ocean, the sharp smells of brine and dead fish, wind and wet and rich man's coffee, and the claustral sweetness of diesel fuel and the steely flavor of microbrew and the hammering chords of Northwestern rock knocking away at my mind's foundations. Only once did I almost drown up there. It was years before I'd ever be able to eat anything that had ever lived in the sea again.

The stern-faced caretaker pointed at my feet. A row of shoes stood along the wall to the right of the entranceway, and I quickly slipped off my athletic shoes and placed

them next to a beat-up pair of Nikes, the swash more than ever like a cross between a boomerang and a scythe. The caretaker gave me an appraising, suspicious look – no doubt he suspected the motives for my visit. I wasn't sure myself of my motives. He may have thought, like the woman in the veil on our long night walk, though less facetiously, "FBI, FBI." I tried to look as respectful and polite and unassuming as possible, though it didn't come easily: I haven't had a lot of practice. But I knew I should behave at least as respectfully as in church, then add a dollop of the preacher, the preacher's wife, a cop stopping me for a traffic violation, and my great aunt on her 98th birthday – the respect and humility oozing out of my cringing carcass might just get me by without being decapitated for infecting the mosque and insulting the Prophet (peace be upon him) (see? I'm a quick learner). I wanted to be let in: I knew that much. I would worry about getting out later.

My humility must have been convincing: the caretaker gave me a quick once-over and gestured to a washbasin in the corner.

"You must wash," he said, gruffly, in uneasy English. "Before prayers."

I kneeled over a basin and washed my hands briskly up to the wrists. The caretaker scowled, raising his forearms with a washing motion, so I pushed up my sleeves and rinsed my arms up to the elbow, waiting for the water to drip before flinging away the rest and drying off with my handkerchief (there were no towels). The caretaker scowled approvingly and pulled back a thin curtain and I walked cautiously into the interior of the mosque.

It was a single immense room, almost bare, with a few roof supports, white-washed walls without pictures, ornaments, décor of any kind, a niche at the far end, and a large red carpet stapled to the floor. Maybe thirty men were lined up elbow to elbow in rows, kneeling on the carpet and facing the niche – facing east, as a quick guess assured me: the direction of the rising sun, and Mecca. The movements of the men were almost perfectly synchronized: they bowed forward until their foreheads touched the ground, then sat back on their haunches; stood, lowering their heads toward the east, then sank again to their knees and again bowed their foreheads to the ground. It was all done in great quiet, the only sounds that of the men's clothing, the click of cracking joints, and the murmuring of prayers under the men's breaths.

I found a place at the end of the nearest, the back, row, and followed the others as closely as I could. After getting over my nervousness, which took a few minutes, I felt something I hadn't been prepared for: a sense of lightness, of serenity and peacefulness, an abandonment of my usual jumpiness, my compulsive, obsessive churning thoughts, the anxiety of waking, I called it. When I realized that, I became more nervous - where had all my fear gone? It didn't feel normal. It was only with an act of will that I kept it up – bowing my head to the floor, pulling myself back to my haunches, standing, bowing, lowering myself again – and didn't bolt out of the mosque in a sudden panic. Though panicking over what, I couldn't have told you - over feeling at peace, completely tranquil and serene – and in a public place, surrounded by strangers; somewhere I really wasn't meant to be, had never even been meant to be, at all. And, of course, I should have been a nervous wreck. Wasn't I some sort of fraud, praying there, pretending to be a Muslim? What would happen when they discovered a "nazrene," a crusader, had snuck into their midst like a fox in a chicken coop?

But, after half an hour or so, my nerves faded away, and I gave myself completely to the dreamlike movements of the worshipping men, the slight giddiness I felt from kneeling and standing, up and down, again and again, the sound of the murmuring and the whispering of the men's clothing. The feeling of serenity deepened into a sense of profound if unfocussed trust.

It was not then, but sometime later the thought hit me that this serenity and tranquility I had felt was nothing strange or odd. On the contrary, it had been the anxiety, the constant watchful worry, that was strange, that was almost a sickness, like a low-grade cold I could never shake. This deep, utter peace was the most natural, the most right feeling in the world; it was a sign of health, it *was* health. It was what I *ought* to be feeling, it was what my fear was meant to protect: this was the peace behind the wall that my watchfulness, my guard, had created and was meant to shield; and the wall had, in a way, become the enemy the wall was meant to shield me from. My anxiety, my fear (a fear that came back later with, if anything, renewed force) was the mistake, a stupid and self-perpetuating error. At the time, these thoughts, if they can be so dignified, were all very vague; hardly conscious, feelings, at most ghostly intuitions.

As we went through our regimented prayer motions, I began to feel energized as much as relaxed; almost bouncy. My enthusiasm may have gotten ahead of me; at one point the bearded young man next to me gave me a funny look, but I just squeezed my eyes shut and whispered gibberish anyone would have taken for a prayer.

Then, just as I was getting completely comfortable with this refreshingly new experience, the prayers ended and the little imam I had seen so often going in and out of the mosque the year before rose from the front row and, pushing back the sleeves of his robe, walked up to a small rostrum next to the empty niche.

He spoke for maybe half an hour, in a language I assumed was Arabic, from the strong guttural aspirates and the musical cadences, the winding, repetitious l's and soft vowels, ill'illah'allah, on and on. At first I wondered if he was vocalizing – "singing" a riff on certain syllables, then if he was chanting something from the Koran, his eyes closed, his arms held out, with palms up, as if offering an invocation. He paused, opened his eyes, and gazed out over the men, his eyes finding me easily and glaring with haughty suspicion before dismissing me: the thought "spy or possible convert? Or, who knows, both?" seemed to flicker across his bearded face and vanish in disdain. I flushed. Then he launched into his sermon, if that's what it was.

His voice began quietly, even gently, in grave, grandfatherly tones, after a few minutes lifting and then soaring up into the space above the kneeling men's heads, his tone by turns exhorting, didactic, condemning, pleading, angry, cajoling, nagging, sorrowful, determined, in however futile a cause (the men's implacable sinning, the cause of God himself?). I could hear a desert wind in his voice, sighing over the dunes and wadis of these men before him, all of whom listened as to the most enchanting music, attentive, rapt, their faces tight with concentration, no one taking his eyes off the imam for a moment, there were no signs of drifting attention, polite blankness, stifled or half-hidden yawns, as I'd often seen enough in church – it was as if they were hearing the very words of God. The men sat on their haunches with ramrod-stiff backs: I thought of rows of cobras risen stiffly from a basket in front of a consummate fakir. But there seemed to be nothing fake about this: the mesmerizing waves and tides, the currents and eddies, drift and swell and fall of his voice seemed to have enchanted them, as in a fairy

tale. I wondered into what brief paradise the imam had seduced them, to have made them go frozen in this big, dingy, empty room: they seemed to have retreated into a tiny yet enormous, a limitlessly small and limitlessly vast, inwardness: they were as intent as warriors of the soul, soldiers of the spirit, awaiting commands. I thought I recognized a few of the words the imam said: Allah, Muhammad, in'sh'allah, Qu'ran, jihad. Maybe it was my imagination but at the mention of the last word I thought several of the men's backs seemed to tense, grow straighter. The imam's hawklike profile scanned the room as though it were filled with a thousand believers, not the mere two or three dozen that knelt at his feet: his face seemed to enclose the wide, empty room as though it were the great desert itself, and his little rostrum were the well of Mecca and he Hagar's child Ishmael grown to rule the empty immensity that surrounded it. After a quick peroration he ended and returned to his place in the front row.

I left soon after, feeling curiously peaceful, even euphoric, without knowing why. It was only after I had walked a few blocks that I realized I hadn't seen any women in the mosque; there had been a rough screen toward the back, a broad red expanse of carpet separating it from where the men knelt, but the space behind the screen hardly seemed large enough to accommodate anyone at all behind it, let alone another, separate congregation. And yet, on reflecting, I realized the space must have been for the women. I thought of the woman in the blue and green niqab who I had seen entering and exiting the mosque's side entrance, and the woman in black: is that where they had prayed and listened to the imam's holy harangues, while the men knelt, rapt and oblivious, in the big empty room?

Pratt's lone used bookstore, holding on by its fingernails under the bludgeoning and deluge unleashed by the internet, was not far away, on the western edge of downtown, and I stopped by, browsed the religious section and found a faded paperback of the Koran, a black and cream-yellow Penguin with a picture on the cover of what at first looked like an oriental rug. I closed my eyes, flipped through the pages, stuck my finger at random into the book, opened it and read the first lines my eyes fell on.

"Such is the Paradise you shall inherit by virtue of your good deeds . . ."

I snorted. I didn't need a mystical experience to be told this have *this*.

I flipped through the book again.

". . . and before him Satan from smokeless fire."

This gave me pause: the image of Satan burning hard and bright, without smoke, was curiously haunting. Who was this "him"? I read the rest of the passage; the "him," of course, was man. So Satan, according to the Koran, had been created first: the tormentor before the tormented. I looked up the name of the chapter: "Al-Hijr," which meant nothing to me.

I flipped through the pages again.

"Wait if you will; we too are waiting."

This gave me a small chill. I was certainly waiting, though for what?

I flipped again.

"We do not wrong them, but they wrong themselves."

"Yes," I thought. "That made a certain sense. . ."

Again.

"They shall rush in terror with heads uplifted and hearts utterly vacant. They shall stare, but see nothing."

Again.

"We created man. We know the promptings of his soul, and are closer to him than the vein of his neck."

I placed the book back on the shelf and left. My heart was pounding.

I went home and spent the rest of the day biking around town. After dinner, I plunged into my computer and spent the evening surfing anti-Muslim websites. Google brought up over one and a third million pages containing the phrase anti-Muslim in less than 0.23 seconds. Allah is compassionate and merciful.

The next day, the frenzied flameouts of the internet having cancelled each other out in an overwhelming din, I went back to the bookstore and found the fading copy of the Koran, bought it and took it with me, hiding it in my jacket, though the sales clerk hardly seemed to notice what I was buying. I took the book on my bike out into the lettuce fields at the edge of town, to a clump of trees marking field boundary, set myself up against a tree trunk and, to the piercing sound of cicadas shrilling in the surrounding fields, began to read.

"When Earth is rocked in her last convulsion; when Earth shakes off her burdens, and man asks . . ."

What is it about a mystery, about mysteriousness, secrecy, hiddenness – something we want to penetrate, uncover, and yet, at the same time, there's something in us that wants to leave it hidden, secret and unknown? Partly, of course, there's the challenge: of conquest and discovery, domination, power – of tearing the veil from the mystery. But there's something beyond that, different from that: something satisfying about the mystery itself, about not solving it, not being able to solve it, reveal or conquer it, there is something beautiful in its resistance to us - in our being, in a sense, conquered by it; something about not knowing, not being sure; a kind of hopeful uncertainty . . .

The box on my desk, in my lap, in my hand, the bright screen that gives me the whole world at my fingertips, reveals the limits of the world: the world, the entire universe is nothing more than a metal and plastic face a few inches from my face. It is not infinite. It is not eternal. It is not even very big. The world is nothing but a website. It's been shrunk like a pair of shorts in the wash. It isn't roomy any more, it's crowded, and everyone in it is shouting. I sometimes feel claustrophobic, as though the whole world has been jammed into a space on bigger than an old fashioned telephone booth. Suddenly there's too much world, and all I can see is the length of the chain, the thickness of the walls, of this thing called "reality," expressed with anxious disdain, as if by being cynical we could somehow kill it. And then there's the demand to reveal everything, a demand for me to reveal everything, bare all, tell us everything, what have you go to hide, what are you hiding, who do you think you are to keep anything from us?

Maybe all I wanted to do was protect my own little mystery, my own secret hiding places. Because maybe to have no secret is to have no self, no soul . . . anyway, I was beginning to feel sick of seeing everything. I hadn't realized just how sick until I saw the woman in the black veil. Or at least that was when I began to think about these things. Then she disappeared . . .

One Friday, I followed the imam after the main prayers. I had many questions about Islam and, naturally, thought he'd be able to answer them, or be willing at least to help me understand his religion.

So I followed him at a discreet distance a block or two past the mosque. Several of his students were following him; over twenty minutes or so, one by one they left, and he continued on alone under the hot afternoon sun. A breath of dust passed across the street, obscuring him for a moment. Once the dry, hot mist had passed, I quickened my steps.

"Excuse me . . ."

He seemed not to hear, or to ignore the words. Perhaps he was slightly deaf. I was almost even with him.

"Excuse me, sir? . . ."

He stopped abruptly and turned toward me his wizened face beneath a turban that, seen this close, looked ragged, dirty. His hair and beard were unevenly trimmed; I flashed on an image of him awkwardly trimming his beard in a dirty mirror. He was surprisingly short – a full half a head smaller than me. And yet he managed to look down at me past a pair of big, flaring nostrils, his eyes squinting fiercely.

I felt suddenly ashamed. I didn't know how to begin. Every opening seemed ridiculous.

The imam stood, mute, watchful. There was something almost like a dare on his face. He wasn't going to help me.

"I . . . I . . . ," I stammered. "I have been coming to the mosque . . ."

He blinked, slowly, in the hard hot sunlight.

"I . . . I would like to learn more about your faith . . . "

His face had become a mask.

". . . honestly . . . I'm very interested . . how . . . how can I find out?"

He waved his hand dismissively.

"The internet!" His voice was harsher when heard close up. He spoke as though he were still speaking in the vacant hall of the mosque, projecting his voice so the women behind the distant back screen could hear him.

"Yes, I have read a lot on the internet, but . . . ," I said, "but I need to find out more, I need to learn from someone who truly knows, really understands. Anyone can say anything on the internet – anyone who knows nothing can spread . . . well, can spread lies . . . I don't know who to trust . . . so I began coming to the mosque . . . to hear you speak . . ."

The eyes, still wary, softened under the flattery.

"The internet is Satan's playground. Even when it speaks truth, it is sometimes a lie," the imam said, still watching me closely. "You must read the Koran," he added, cocking his chin up slightly. I pulled out my old Penguin and showed it to him. He laughed derisively.

"That is not the Koran. The Koran cannot be translated!"

I stared at him.

"Read the Koran in Arabic, and then come back to me," he said, looking me, for the first time, full in the face.

"Is that what I have to do?" I asked, dismayed.

He laughed hard, unpleasantly, from his belly, more relaxed. Not the police, not a spy, just a foolish infidel, he seemed to be thinking.

He again stared down his big flared nostrils.

"No! That is only the beginning of what you have to do."

He turned abruptly on his heel and marched off, his turban bobbing up and down as he moved rapidly away.

I looked doubtfully at my spurned copy of the "Koran." Desultorily I flipped through its pages, stuck in a finger, and read the first words my eyes fell on.

"We do not wrong them, but they wrong themselves."

Feeling as if I had been stung, I turned and walked away, fast.

I decided to read the entire Koran in English first. One step at a time. I wanted to tear away the veil gently.

So I dug in and began, patiently, to study the fading paperback with the carpet design on the cover. I plowed through the aridities of "The Cow," the weirdness of "The Imram" (it's like reading the story of Jesus through a distorting mirror), the completely disappointing chapter on "Women." But I kept at it: past the tedium, the nonsense, the annoying repetitions ("Allah is forgiving and merciful" – right, I got it the first six times), the non-sequiturs, the transparent manipulations (do what I tell you, and get the greatest reward you ever dreamed of; do what I tell you *not* to do, and you'll wish you had never been born) – behind all the double-talk, the rambling, the incoherence, I sensed something else going on, far more important than the surface meaning. I started keeping notes. Certain things came up that I hadn't expected. For example, a definition of sin, not as a wrong against God, but as a wrong against oneself. It was repeated endlessly: a lesson to be dinned into our dense brains till we never forgot it. Maybe this idea was new to nobody else, but it felt like a revelation to me. The demand for good works was another: none of that "first believe in me" nonsense: leave behind you a life of wreckage, but I say "I believe in Jesus," and, brother and sister, you're off the hook. No: You must *do* good: you must bring forth good in the world. Maybe you can even force God's hand, maybe you can *make* him bless you . . .

But the biggest thing of all for me was the specific demand for gratitude - and the constant rebukes of mankind for its lack of it. One verse especially got to me:

"Confound man! How ungrateful he is!"

I laughed out loud when I read that, and something seemed to open, like a swinging gate. It seemed so clearly true (we were an often whining, self-pitying, ungrateful lot), and the sweet, hapless consternation of Allah in response - like that of a furious but still not despairing parent, an angry but watchful father - was so right it was funny: the Almighty letting out a curse (and a mild enough curse it is, from someone who, for a believer, could truly and eternally damn the lot of us if he chose to), an irascible oath of impatience at his exasperating, incorrigible creation.

Ungrateful . . . maybe that was a curse *and* a blessing, the essence of our being and the goad of our destiny, a knout of the fate that forces us onward, despite everything,

as though working out a plan we have no understanding of (a case might even be made to justify our ingratitude, given life's unrelenting barrage of false hopes and painfully real disappointments): to be "ungrateful," to despise the gifts we're offered because they're so rarely the gifts we wanted; even spurning them when they are, as they invariably end up tasting of ashes, never as sweet as the gifts we dreamed of getting and never got (is there anything more enchanting to the mind than the thought of a joy we missed? the woman I didn't get? the prize won by someone else? Yet, if I had gotten her, would have I been happy with her? If I had won, would I have *cared*?); always, always, always to demand more than will ever satisfy us, as if never knowing what will actually, truly, please us, satisfy us, make us happy. . . . If so, we are cursed indeed, I thought, as I underlined the passage, thinking as well, "And why did you make us so perverse?"

I slept with the Koran under my pillow. No doubt this was a sacrilegious thing to do, but it felt good to have it so close. As close as a cell phone. Hopefully, without causing brain cancer, though you never know: if magnetic waves can disturb your genes, who knows what the echoes of the voice of God might do? In that case, of course, all other considerations would disappear like dispersing smoke. None of that would matter: it would be a game, *a sport and a pastime, like the plants that flourish after rain, for the life of this world is but a vain provision,* as it says somewhere, in a chapter called, oddly, "Iron."

. . . *a sport and a pastime*, I thought, with what felt like a smile on my lips as I drifted off to sleep. . . . *what if it's just a game, reality, that trades winners and losers, in an endless round, you too will win . . . you too will lose . . . enjoy yourself, it makes no difference, though it can be entertaining to think one does . . . and entertainment is not to be despised . . . no, don't take reality too seriously . . .*

I'm not sure how long afterward I got up very early for a predawn jog. This wasn't usual for me, though I had done it a few times in the past. It was late August, and dawn still came early. I had slept badly, and the first dim wash of light across the east made bed seem suddenly pointless.

The streets were ghostly, largely silent, with only a few bread trucks and one or two busses taking graveyard-shift workers home – room clerks, office cleaners, security guards. The houses were blacked out. The shadows looked strange: it felt like twilight out, except the shadows were wrong, as well as the sky, which moved implausibly toward brightness. I biked at random, trying to spark some novelty out of the banal usualness of the town. An edge of town I hadn't visited in months, if not years, appeared in front of me, past the Conco silos off Jefferson, and I stopped and gazed across the dusky fields under stars disappearing one by one. I breathed in a rich smell of dew-damp soil. Shadowy clumps of bushes and trees stood here and there near a row of cornfields, already late for harvest. A light breeze stirred, drawing a chill off the land that would miss it soon enough. I looked at the patch of musty light on the horizon where the sun would shortly be rising into the sky.

One of the bushes not far off suddenly seemed to bow down toward the horizon.

Startled, I looked closer.

A second bush, next to the first, did the same, bowed toward the horizon, or seemed to. Curious, I walked my bike over, suddenly halting.

Three women wearing dark hoods or head scarves were standing silently at the edge of the field, facing the muddled eastern horizon. In front of them, a few yards away, three men and two young boys knelt, also facing the east, their heads lowered to the earth.

Slowly, silently, almost distractedly, the smudge of light above the eastern horizon faded away into brightness, revealing pale, high cirrus clouds and a night sky drawing back to display the blue like a skin beneath a veil, and then the topmost arc of a sphere of fiery orange materialized above the hazy horizon, rising and pulling up behind it a flattened disk swelling with serene and silent majesty like an enormous, oval balloon turning into a face that intensified at a gradual and irresistible pace into a defiant whiteness and a shaft of warmth that hit me like an arrow. Birds burst into singing around the field.

If I hadn't known otherwise, I might have half-believed the praying family had something to do with coaxing the sun above the horizon. But when I looked over toward them, they were gone. I looked back, wondering if I'd hallucinated them, but there they were, walking in single file away from the field a hundred yards off. They had finished their prayers and not waited to see the day's first pageant. The veils on the women's heads stirred in the dawn wind.

I kicked out the bike's stand, and sat on the ground, watching the sun, listening to the birds' ecstatic singing, and thinking hard, until my hunger pangs refused to be ignored, and the sun had melted into a blinding spot of unendurable brightness.

The next morning I got up again before dawn, biked to the nearest fields, a quarter mile away, rested my bike against a tree, and stood facing the milky light gradually growing from the hard, strict definitions of darkness toward the murkier, false clarity of dawn. Then, remembering the prayers in the mosque, I got down on my knees and bowed my forehead until it touched the dirt.

Three days later I was walking downtown, near the Walgreens, when I saw a woman across the street, in a black, robe-like dress and hooded veil that covered her head and face except for her eyes. I was surprised, even astonished. At first I thought it was the woman I'd first seen over a year before. But of course it couldn't possibly be the same woman. She was not as tall and the length of her tread was shorter, though she too had the same bouncy, loping walk I had noted in the other woman.

I stopped and stared as she passed. After a moment, she seemed to notice, and her head turned slightly toward me. I saw a glint from one of her eyes, through the small, pale slit in her veil, then she turned her gaze back, firmly, ahead. I continued watching her as she walked down the street, a patch of black diminishing as she moved farther and farther away, then she turned a corner and vanished.

His eyes fastened on the corner in the distance where the woman in the veil had disappeared. He turned away from his original destination and, walking quickly and determinedly, moved toward the point where she had vanished. It was not long before he too reached the same spot. He stopped, hesitated, looked back where he had come, then, making up his mind, followed where the woman had gone, and disappeared.

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Christopher Bernard is a principal and co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. He writes fiction, essays, plays and poetry and is author of the novel *A Spy in the Ruins*. Prisoner of Darkness originally appeared in *Synchronized Chaos International Magazine* (http://synchchaos.com/).