

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

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Rain

I.

They came from the same roots, Fareed and Ravil did. The same neighborhood. The same streets. The same schools. And most of all, the same church.

And they worshiped and prayed together. As did their wives and children. For years. Side by side. Literally, side by side. But in their thirties, their views began to diverge. It started when a visiting church leader from outside their district came to their church and talked about the need to expand the meaning of the church's foundational principles, to reinterpret them in light of the modern world, the world of technology, commerce, global travel and progress. The leaders of the church were appalled by what he said. They asserted just the opposite. That the values and principles of the outside world, the world of technology, commerce, global travel and progress, were lax, debasing and were, in a single word, immoral. They argued the need to adhere even more steadfastly to the church's orthodox rules. "To return to our heritage. To be true to our traditional beliefs and practices," as they summed it up, "for these beliefs and practices have served us well for centuries and will continue to serve us well in these times of challenge from the outside world." Ravil agreed with the elders of the church. Fareed wasn't so sure. To him, the message of the outsider rang true, put into words many of the ideas he felt stirring within him, that he intuitively felt, but had not quite been able to express in words himself. But when he heard the outsider speak, those vaguely shaped stirrings within took immediate shape, they were clear and ringing. They resonated and he knew that they were true and right. He knew that the outsider's words were what he wanted for his wife and most importantly, for his children. Particularly, his daughters.

True, many of the points made by the outsider dealt with what at first seemed like minor matters. Things like what women should be permitted to wear, what they could do for the church, reading material appropriate for children...things like that. But, as sometimes happens, little things grew to be big...as acorns turn into giant oaks...and as a seed once planted....

So Fareed began to read and study further the subjects that the outsider had talked about. And he found other sources, other texts and other tracts which spoke to these new directions and which departed even further from the orthodox tenets adhered to by the elders. And he obtained tapes of sermons along similar lines which he asked to have played in the sanctuary of the church and, if not there, then in the basement where sometimes more informal meetings were held.

But, the elders of the church were opposed. So was Ravil. Indeed, Ravil was quite upset by Fareed's proposals. He was so offended that he forbade his wife to speak with Fareed's wife and his children to play with Fareed's. The families no longer worshiped together; and, eventually, Ravil stopped talking to Fareed altogether.

But that was months ago.

That was before Fareed opened a new school—albeit a very small one,

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but a new school nevertheless—in an empty storefront two blocks away from the church. That was before Fareed started hiring teachers from other districts who believed in the new ideas and who began teaching them to those neighborhood children who enrolled in the new school. That was before the children of the new school started communicating these ideas to their friends who attended the older, established school...the school supported by the elders of the church and in which Ravil's children were enrolled. And that was before Ravil's children talked about the new ideas which they had learned from their friends at dinner with Ravil and his wife. Before his children asked Ravil questions that challenged his beliefs. Challenged what he had always been taught. Challenged his faith.

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They waited in the basement of the church for the last of the prisoners to arrive, Fareed. The others had already been captured and were safely secured with their hands and feet taped and tape across their mouths. They were seated on the floor separately so they couldn't touch one another.

The tape, of course, didn't cover the noses of the prisoners and didn't cover their eyes. It didn't hide their furtive, fearful glances, the terror that each one felt.

The guards walked around the prisoners with their guns. In the basement of the church. There were twelve guards. Two for each prisoner. They'd gone--six teams of two--to the homes of the prisoners and captured them. Just after ten in the evening. Just before bedtime. Except in the case of one who'd already gone to bed. They interrupted his wife and him and yanked him from their bed. He was the one without a shirt. Just jeans and sandals. And now the tape covering his mouth.

Outside, it was a cloudy night and there was lightning off the distance...out over the sea. And thunder. Soon it would start to rain, one of the guards said. He expressed the wish that they conclude their business before it started to rain. Before the thunder and lightning came. He said he was afraid of lightning. One of the other guards told him to be quiet.

After that, the guards walked around the prisoners with their AK-47's and their boots and they said very little. The only sounds now were the heavy tread of the guards' boots on the basement floor, the strained breathing of the prisoners, and the distant thunder.

Like the prisoners, the guards, too, were nervous and scared. Most of them were still boys in their late teens. Only three or four were in their 20's. None was yet 25. Earlier, one of the youngest ones had asked if they really had to do this. An older one assured him that they did. "It is God's will," he said. "Ravil has said so. They have undermined the teachings of the church. They have betrayed the faith. We are the *takfiri*, the true believers, the defenders and the enforcers of the faith. They are apostates and have forsaken the sacred ways. For this they must be punished. We cannot let them spread their evil creed. Ravil has said it is God's will and that we must do so," he said.

The boy who had asked didn't answer. He looked down. He was afraid the other guards might think that he was weak, might see his tears.

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Finally, Ravil came in with Fareed. Fareed was bleeding from a gash on his forehead. His hair and his clothes were disheveled. He'd obviously been beaten. He, too, had his hands taped behind his back and there was tape across his mouth. But not his feet. This enabled him to walk; walk, prodded by a rifle barrel.

Ravil apologized for being late. He said that Fareed had put up a fight...quite a struggle...and that he was glad Nuri and Mamoon had been with him so that they...the three of them...could subdue Fareed.

"Okay. Let's go. Let's take them outside," Ravil said.

The guards cut the tape from the ankles of the other prisoners and prodded them with their guns to get them up. They marched the prisoners up the concrete stairs and out the back door of their church. Some of the prisoners walked forward, erect, defiant, proud. Fareed was one of those. Others sagged and fell on the steps and had to be kicked and jabbed hard with the rifles to get them to move.

When they were all outside, Ravil ordered the prisoners to be lined up against the wall at the rear of the courtyard behind the church. The guards stepped back away from the prisoners and Ravil began to berate them. He called them traitors and dogs and unbelievers. Fareed's eyes were riveted on Ravil as he spoke. His stare was hard, contemptuous and unrelenting. For most people, it would have been unsettling. But not for Ravil. It made no impact on Ravil whatsoever. He simply kept berating the prisoners and particularly Fareed for initiating all of the radical and immoral ideas. He called the prisoners scum and said that they polluted the minds of children, that they betrayed the true faith and offended God with their impure ways. Then he ordered them shot.

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Their bodies jumped as the bullets hit them. Afterwards, when they lay slumped on the stones of the courtyard, some of them still twitched and made little jerking motions as if they were trying to awaken. Blood and bits of flesh and bone and other matter had splattered on the wall. Little rivers seeped from their wounds and pooled, glistening, on the stones in the moonlight. Reflecting the lightning.

And in the distance, there was thunder.

The fresh pock marks made by the bullets in the old stone wall shown like newly minted, tiny little silver stars in the spectral lunar light.

The boy who had asked if they had to do what now had been done cried softly to himself. His tears made rivulets...little streams...down his dusky, unwashed cheeks. Once again, he hung his head so his tears and his weakness would not be seen.

Ravil then ordered his men to put the bodies into bags, to load the bags with stones and to take them out to sea and dispose of them. The men did as they were told. Silently. The only sound was the squeaking of the swollen plastic bags as they were filled and tied. That and the distant thunder out over the sea. The anthem of the thunder out over sea.

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II.

*Softly
In the darkest hours
When all was still
And the city slept
When the lights were off
And the traffic gone
While dogs and birds were dreaming*

The rain began to fall

Gently

*At first just misting
Like a gauze settling
Like moonlight
Slowly lowering itself
Weary and spent
From a long journey*

*Glistening
Refracting the lunar light
Lambent on the stones*

*And it was caressing
Caressing and delicate
Tender like a mother's touch
Feeling with blind fingers
Reading the braille
The inscriptions of the braille
The braille on the pavement
The braille on the wall
The residue of the prisoners
Their braille on the wall
Their braille on the pavement
The detritus of prisoners
Dried
Splattered
Clinging to the stones
Clinging to the pavement
Clinging to the wall*

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*Then, as if offended,
The rain increased its force
Began to come on stronger
Began to come on hard
Began to fall with vengeance
Pounding down
Beating down
Coming down in torrents
Coming down in waves
Sheets
Sheets of heavy rain
Washing
Rinsing
Until the street was clean
Until the blood was gone
Until the gore was gone
The wall and pavement clean
Clean, no longer stained*

*And once again the courtyard fresh
Fresh and pure and clean
The courtyard and the air
The air just after rain
Fresh and clean and pure
Reborn
Reborn and fresh again
The gift of cleansing rain*

*And then the sun arose
Turning dark to gray
In the freshness of the air
The reborn air
The sun set forth the day
Casting forth its light
Its rays*

*But with the rays came shadows
Shadows on the pavement
Shadows on the stones
Shadows on the courtyard
Shadows on the wall*

*Shadows of the church
Shadows of its dome
Falling on the pavement
Falling on the stones
Falling on the courtyard
Falling on the wall*

*Shadows of the church
Shadows that the rain
Could not wash away.*