

Twist of Fate
Paige Pagan

I let out a hollow breath and my shoulders hunch over as my chest heaves. My mouth remains open and I'm not sure whether I want to yell or cry, but neither comes out. The right side of my heart throbs and I'm forced to clutch at my chest but to no avail, the left side immediately throbs after reaching a crescendo in my ears. Sweat beads travel down my spine and numb every area they surpass. My heartbeat is accelerating now, but my body is frozen to this spot where so many lives have already changed.

Everything becomes slow motion. All the people running away from the corner deli are treading through quicksand and all the cars suddenly run out of gas at the same time, coming to a halt on their last fumes.

In a blur, the man in red falls back as he's hit on the right, then on the left. The two shots are ringing in my ears, replaying the scene in my mind. I bring my hands up to cover my ears and close my eyes tightly. When I open them a second later the weapon is being withdrawn and I feel myself shiver, my arms become covered in goosebumps. I mechanically shake my head from side to side, inching backwards with my hands reaching behind me, ready to break my trip. My bottom lip trembles and perhaps a slight no escapes my agape mouth.

As the man in blue standing before the fallen body rotates to look behind him, his eyes slowly follow and meet mine from across the street, behind the staircase leading up to the train station. For a minute, everything disappears and it's just him and I looking into each other's souls and cringing. I stagger and clutch onto the railing at the bottom of the staircase. My legs feel like steel, much too heavy for my petite frame and impossible to carry me away from this notorious scene.

I break our stare when my eyes dart from his to the body lying on the ground in front of him. Deep red blood begins to color the grey sidewalk and expands outwards creating a pool encircling this Bloods body. The bright red shirt he's wearing is drenched and turns almost black, and I momentarily wonder if his dark blood reflects a dark soul.

Shouts from the three Crips running down the block are reverberating in my ears, "RUN, RUN!"

I see him running across the street straight in my direction. My silent tears begin to turn into heavy sobs when I hear him yell back to the three men, "THAT'S MY DAUGHTER!"

"What are you doing out here? I told you to stay home!" He yells as he grabs both my shoulders. "What are you doing here?" he shakes me.

I continue to cry in a loud and uncontrollable hysteria. I can't even manage to croak out a single word. He grabs my hand and tries to jerk me forward, but my feet are glued to this spot.

"Siobhan lets go! We have to go!" He's yelling in my face. I look at him and see his bloodshot hazel eyes, the same eyes I've inherited.

“Siobhan!” I hear him repeat my name over and over. Is he actually repeating it or is his voice just stuck in my head? He’s not saying it the way he usually does.

He spits out his spearmint gum and the next thing I know I’m cupped in his arms like when I was young. He’s running and I think I’m in shock. Everything gets blurry and then the scene before me becomes pure white. Am I dying? I think I should say a prayer before I go. Allah, please...

“Are you insane? How could you do that in front of her? How could you do that in front of the whole neighborhood?”

“I didn’t know she was there. I told her to stay home. No one in this neighborhood will dare cross me.”

“You know she’s been worrying ever since you came home.”

“She’s fifteen, that’s not her place to worry. Maybe if you were worried about her and actually acted like a mother, she would’ve stood home.”

“Don’t you dare turn this on me Abel. If anyone has caused her trauma it’s always been you.”

My heavy eyelids slowly open at the sound of my parents’ bickering but I can only keep them narrow. I already know without having to look at them that my eyes are swollen, they feel like they do when you wake up after having a long and hard cry and then falling asleep right after. I swallow hard and lick my chapped lips, I feel like I haven’t had a sip of water for days.

Their arguing is getting louder now and I feel my temples begin to ache. There’s never much communication that I witness between my parents except when they’re blaming each other for their own faults. It’s as though they’re in a competition to prove who’s the worst parent but the truth is that they’re both absent. Dad is physically absent when he gets thrown in jail time after time and mom is mentally absent when she enters into her episodes and checks out of reality altogether. Both forgetting that they have a daughter.

I look from my place on the loveseat in the living room towards the small area between my room and the bathroom that I painted with different Islamic motifs. I colored the off-white background of the back wall with the image of my pink and gold tasbeeh beads¹ that has a thread extending from it of the familiar crescent moon and adjacent star. Next to that is the image of the dome of my masjid², turquoise with golden accents and a white spiral reaching towards Jannah³. The image of the cover of my Quran draws my eyes next, baby pink with the inscription of the first surah on the front. My orange and yellow prayer rug lies on the floor facing towards the wall.

¹ Islamic prayer beads.

² Islamic word for mosque.

³ Paradise, equivalent of Heaven.

I gasp and shift my eyes to the cable box in front of me to see the time. I missed Asr⁴. I swing my legs over and when my feet touch the floor, I spring up but immediately fall back down as black spots form before me and my vision becomes fuzzy.

“Siobhan,” my dad says when he notices I’m awake. He sprints over to the loveseat and crouches down beside me. He says it in his normal lilting voice and I feel comforted. I like that my dad is the only person that ever says my full name all the time, it has become something that belongs to only him and I. While everyone else calls me Siob, he always says Siobhan, turning the rough b at the end of Siob soft as it mingles with the elongated h.

I look into his eyes when he becomes leveled with me and smile at their return to a shade below emerald green like mine. The outer rim of his irises are encircled with a golden honey color, exuding a twinkle that has become a part of him only at his best. With that thought, the memories begin flooding back.

I sigh and feel my eyes begin to water.

“You know you shouldn’t have been where I was. You didn’t listen to me,” he scolded.

“I…” phlegm gathered in my throat, I swallowed hard again and cleared it away, “I didn’t want you getting into trouble. You’ve only been back for a week and I need you here with me,” I said looking from him to my mother and then back at him again.

He stood quiet for a minute and let his head fall. When he looked back up at me his eyes were glassy and his golden tint was tarnished, embodying a sorrowful beauty. His features were soft, like the dad I always knew.

He sniffed back a tear and said, “You know Siobhan, you’re old enough to know that sometimes we have to make a choice that we don’t want to make, and we have to do things we don’t want to do. This isn’t the life I envisioned for my daughter. But I try everything in my power to make sure that you have a roof over your head, clothes on your back and food in your stomach. Do I always do it in the right way? Of course not. But I find a way to make it happen regardless. And I would do anything for you. I’d give up my life for you. You know that.”

I look away from his eyes, trying to hold back my tears. I’ve cried too much already. I set my gaze on the side of his arm and slightly smile at his tattoo. Spelled out in child letter blocks vertically is my name, his miracle child. He always tells me that it took him and mom ten years to conceive me and the doctors were doubtful if mom would ever get pregnant. Maybe it was Allah saying he needed more time to create someone that would be able to withstand this life. People say God only puts his strongest soldiers through the hardest wars, but he’ll never present us with anything we can’t handle. I don’t even think I’m a soldier anymore, I’m the sergeant.

“Yes, but it didn’t have to be that way,” I said.

“How do you know? You have no idea about life on the streets, and that’s my doing. I wanted to shield you from that existence because you’re meant for something so much better than this.”

⁴ Late afternoon prayer.

“So are you dad.” I said helplessly, my voice cracking. “You don’t have to do all this.”

“There’s one thing you still have to learn. When you commit to something, there’s no going back.” He got up and walked over to the dining table and grabbed his keys.

“I’ll be back,” he said, walking out the door.

For the first time I get angry that dad always takes the easy route. How convenient it is to walk away from your problems, leaving them to torment the conscience of another. I always have to pay for my parents’ wrongdoings because I’m the only one who seems to recognize that they’re wrong. I admit that I overthink too often but this life has me treading down a constantly winding river where each turn presents a fork with the right path and the wrong one. With the grace of Allah on my side, I always try to take the smoothest course, or at least the one I believe is the smoothest.

With the slam of the door behind him, mom jumps at the noise and quickly looks to the side of her and says with a giggle, “You’re not strong enough to do that Jude.” Then she looks at me breaking out into a fit of laughter and bends her body sideways. I take a deep breath in and look up to the ceiling. Sometimes I wish I also heard the voices mom hears in her head so that I could understand the jokes too.

“Jude says he pushed him to do it. It’s all written in our paths, you know. We’re just pawns in the devil’s work,” my mom says mechanically without breath. “Now everyone in the neighborhood will know what he did. But no one cares and cowardice fosters silence.”

I slowly rise from the couch and walk over to her standing in the archway between the dining and living room. I approach her with my arms outstretched and her eyes widen and she takes a few steps back.

“Mom,” I whimper, “It’s okay.”

Her eyebrows furrow and her hands dash up to her temple. She groans and closes her eyes.

“I’m not crazy Jude! Stop it! Don’t laugh at me!” she screams. She begins pounding on her temples and stomping her feet.

I run to the kitchen counter where her medications are usually lined up, but they’re not there. My eyes start darting everywhere in search of them and my breaths accelerate as I hear her behind me yelling at the voices. I turn to her and ask where her medications are but she just continues to cry and scream. I sink down to the floor against the kitchen cabinets and stare ahead of me at nothing. With my mothers screams in my ears and my fathers gunshots in my head, I ask Allah why.

The messenger of Allah, Mahmud ibn Labeed said in the Hadith: if Allah loves a people, then he afflicts them with trials. Whoever is patient has the reward of patience and, whoever is impatient has the fault of impatience. But why does love have to result in trauma and why must we have to withstand the storm with the virtue of patience when constant turmoil seems to birth only hopelessness?

I grab my sweater from the dining chair and run out the front door.

I don't stop running, I'm just going. I know I shouldn't leave her when she's like that, but I can't deal with it right now. What about me? What about what I need? No one ever thinks about that. I'm the only one who takes care of mom. Even when dad isn't in jail, it feels like he might as well be because he's not helping me at home anyway. I pick up the pace and start regretting all my prayers to get dad out of jail. If he didn't come home, then this wouldn't have happened. There would still be a husband, father, son and brother walking the streets, probably getting into his own trouble but not getting capped by the only man in my life that I thought was pure. Dad got thrown into jail for petty crime all the time like drugs and theft, nothing serious. Or maybe that's only what he wanted me to believe. But dad is the best man I know. He's not a bad guy, just a foolish one. If he had a choice, he would never do that. That Blood had to be a really bad man for my dad to do that, because a good man wouldn't end another good man, right? But wait, am I looking for justifications? Am I trying to excuse my dad to save him and my perception of him?

I stop and look around me. I ran all the way to Pelham Bay from Allerton. Al-Sayyed Mosque is a few blocks away, maybe Allah was leading me there on purpose. I look down at my jeans, t-shirt and bulky sweater with a frown. Tala's house is around the corner, she always dresses modestly, even though she doesn't subscribe to any religion. She'd have something appropriate to borrow. I take a deep breath and start to walk over to her building.

Tala and I have been friends for only a short while. I transferred high schools this year from my district school when the administrators at Bronx Science discovered a mistake in the scoring of my entrance exam. Every student who wanted to make it out of the Bronx took an entrance exam to get into a specialized high school, it's become normal. What wasn't normal was a girl from my neighborhood actually getting into one of the best specialized high schools in all five boroughs of New York City. I remember the day I received my rejection letter, I was devastated for months after that. I had studied so hard and thought I might actually pull it off, but then I felt that sharp stab of my first failure. It's hard to believe I actually did make it. I'm still trying to get used to Bronx Science and Tala has been helping a lot. Majority of the students are from Manhattan and are well off because their parents work in major companies on Wall Street, or something like that. Tala's different though.

Hey, so I need a favor. I'm literally outside your house. Can you let me in?

I take a sharp breath in and send the text to Tala. Within two minutes I see her running down the stairs of her building from the glass door.

"Hey! What's wrong?" She asks as she swings the door open.

"Nothing," I answer stepping through the door. "I just want to go to the mosque and I don't have proper clothes to wear."

"You didn't know you were going to the mosque earlier?" She laughs as we walk up the stairs to her apartment.

“No, actually I wasn’t originally planning on it.”

“I love that you just go to go, it’s so admirable. Your faith is true. Most people I know just go to church out of obligation,” she said. She looks at me then and frowns. “You actually look a bit disheveled. Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, I just need some time to think and maybe talk to my Imam.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice. Well, you know you can borrow anything,” Tala said.

We walk into her apartment and go down the long hall from the front door, past the sunken living room, to the first bedroom door. For a girl that seems so put together, you would never think Tala’s room would be the cesspool that it is, but you have to love her regardless.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said as she opens the door. She says this every single time I come over, and yet she still doesn’t think I’m used to it.

“So what do you need?” she asked.

“Maybe a long skirt and long sleeve top. Oh, and a headscarf.”

Tala begins rummaging through all her drawers and I find a clean spot on the carpeted pink floor and sit down.

“Where’s your parents?” I ask.

“They went out to lunch together. They have designated quality time days, it’s so funny. They’re super serious about it.”

I force a chuckle. “That’s actually really nice.”

“Yeahhhh.” Tala said nonchalantly.

I awkwardly look around her pink room that’s the size of my room, my prayer space and the bathroom all put together. She lives on the better side of the Bronx, but she’s humble unlike all the other wealthy students. Other than both of us being from the Bronx though, we’re completely different. I grew up riding the subway on the weekends downtown and in the mosque. She grew up going to dance classes every day of the week and studying rigorously on weekends. She has a twin brother, but he goes to a district high school. Her mother always teases that there has to be a smarter sibling. Her parents are the ideal couple and completely welcoming every time I go over. They give me hope that there is a possibility of normalcy.

“Ugh, sorry, I’m going to find the perfect outfit. There’s nothing to fear!” she said in an animated voice.

I wasn’t worried that Tala wouldn’t find the proper outfit, it’s like she has everything under the sun and the world at her fingertips. I momentarily think about how clear her mind must be after having been just placed on the path that’s steady as the softly beating drum. Guilt flushes over me immediately. I have to be grateful for the life I’ve been given. I imagine Tala in my shoes and almost swoon at the misery she would face. A gentle, pure soul like her wouldn’t stand a chance if she was given my life.

I look at her face and it turns into one of concentration mixed with a bit of frustration. Her sleek, wavy black hair runs down her back, perfectly falling into place. There’s no way Tala can ever look disheveled because she’s a natural beauty. Compared to my curly brown hair that

spirals every which way and ends right below my shoulders, Tala should be in a Pantene commercial. Her caramel skin-tone makes her look like she never needs a tan while I'm pale as day. We're both petite, but Tala actually has curves, whereas I at fifteen haven't even begun womanly development.

"Okay, what do you think?" Tala bursts through my trance. She's holding out a long, flowy hunter green skirt that has a long line of buttons down the front and a long sleeve black shirt that scrunches at the ends of the sleeves and is loose at the midriff.

"Nice," I answer.

"Great!" she said excitedly and hands me the outfit. She turns quickly to grab a black cotton head scarf and hands it to me as well.

I begin to change and Tala plops down in front of me to see her finished masterpiece.

"Wow, you look great," she said when I put on the clothes and wrap my hijab.

"I've never seen you in a hijab before, you wrap it so easily," she said.

"Yeah I know, I look different."

"But still the same person." Tala stands and smiles at me. "You're beautiful."

I let out a breathy giggle and scratch my knee that's not itchy. I look back up into Tala's light brown eyes. She's returned to her usual tranquil attitude that makes her look like she has no worries in the world. That thought jolts me back to reality.

"I have to go, if I get there any later I'm going to miss my Imam," I said turning towards the door.

"Wait," Tala said as she grabs my hand. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears and suddenly it got really hot under this hijab.

"Do you want me to go with you?" she asked.

I look at her in surprise and then smile a smile that feels like the most genuine smile I've had in my life. I intertwine our fingers locking our hands together tightly. I notice one lock of hair stuck to her eyelashes and with my other hand pull it away, tucking her hair behind her ear to reveal her birthmark-kissed cheek.

"That's okay, this is something I have to do alone." I said as I let go of her hand and run out towards the front door. I'm not sure if I'm running because I'm late to the mosque or because... well I don't know the other reason exactly.

I get outside and start pacing the two blocks to the mosque on Mayflower Avenue. I always found it funny that Al-Sayyed Mosque is across the street from St. Theresa's Catholic Church. While many of my brothers and sisters want ours to be the only place of worship on that street, St. Theresa's was there first, and when our mosque was built they could've put up a bigger fight than they did about it. It's a comforting thought, to me at least, that two religions can coexist semi-peacefully. There will always be those few that are against progression.

I give my skirt a quick shake, grab the sleeves of my shirt and pull them all the way down and tuck in any loose strands of hair in my hijab. I step right foot first into the mosque and look

towards the Qibla⁵. I feel my tears returning as I walk to the front of the mosque and look for Imam Mohammed. I've spoken to Imam Mohammed many times over the past few years and I've become comfortable with him. He has a wife and three children who are all in elementary school. I babysat for them once a few months ago, they're good kids. I find him to the right standing in the direction of the Qibla alone. I sprint over to him and whisper his name when I get behind him. He turns and smiles at me.

"Assalamualaykum Siobhan."

"Waalaykumussalam, do you have a few minutes?"

He looks up towards the upper floor that's designated for the women, which was empty. It wasn't during any prayer time. He nodded his head in agreement.

I take a deep breath and look down at the floor. "I've witnessed something terrible. A murder, right before my eyes... and by someone I know."

Now Imam Mohammed takes a deep breath and raises his eyebrows. "Whatever you do with this knowledge will say much about your character. Remember, there's virtues and there's obligations. Don't confuse the two."

I know he meant to remember that honesty is a religious obligation and not a virtue. Being dishonest maliciously is seen as departing from religion and skewing your relationship with Allah. But I knew all of that, I didn't come here for a lesson in the Quran, I came for something real.

"Imam, I know what the Quran prescribes. I want to know what a human with a conscience would prescribe."

"I can't tell you what to do Siobhan. You came here because you know that Allah would tell you to do something you don't want to do. I can't tell you what you want to hear, I could only advise you as Allah would. Ultimately, it's up to you to decide what's best. But many people are involved in your decision-making. Don't let this destroy your good character, there will be consequences in the end."

"I always face consequences. That's what my life consists of," I answer.

"Not consequences, but trials," he retorts.

"But when am I going to get a break?"

"Never. Trials will always be presented to you in this lifetime, only in Paradise will we then be able to live trial-free."

My tears begin to fall. I sniff and say in a broken voice, "But what if we don't make it that far?"

I turn to walk away before he can respond.

I step with my left foot out of the mosque and murmur a quick tawba⁶.

Walking back towards Tala's building, my heart feels even heavier than it did before. I thought going to the mosque would help me in knowing how to navigate through this experience,

⁵ The direction of the Kaaba, the sacred building in Mecca, to which Muslims turn in prayer.

⁶ Islamic concept of repenting to Allah.

but all it did was reassure me about what is the only right thing to do. But what happens when the right thing to do in religion may not be the right thing to do in the streets? Do I follow in the righteous path as the Hadith prescribes by telling the truth about what I saw, ratting out my own father and hearing about his death behind bars? Or do I save my father, the person that I love more than anything in the world, and live the rest of my life with the weight of a taken life?

I grab the ends of my hijab and crunch it in my hands, then yank it off my head. I have a religious obligation, and I have a personal obligation, both targeted at the center of my morality. What type of daughter would I be if I rat my father out, and what type of daughter would I be to the ultimate father if I don't follow his most sacred obligation?

My cell phone rings from my skirt pocket, interrupting my conflicting thoughts. I take it out and look at the screen, *Unknown*. I pick it up and a police officer is on the other line prompting me to go to the 49th precinct. When I hang up, I stare ahead of me and begin my journey back towards Allerton. Allerton, the place I call home, now tainted by a crime I will remember for the rest of my life. A place that held many fond childhood memories, now marking the death of blissful youth.

I envision my dad's face, smiling at me with his hazel, honey-rimmed eyes and saying he loves me more than anything. 'You are my life, my soul, my purpose in living.' I hear him say as he brushes my hair into two curly pigtails that end up being lop-sided for the first day of kindergarten. I see myself at five years old clinging onto my dad's neck as the teachers are pulling me into the classroom that would in a few minutes become my new favorite place. I see my dad sitting across from me on the spinning teacup ride in Playland, I see him running through the sprinklers with me in Pelham Bay Park, I see him galloping through the sand with me in Orchard Beach. I sigh and smile to myself.

Looking upwards, gripping Tala's head scarf in my hands, I whisper, "Inshallah,⁷ I still make it to Paradise."

⁷ Literally translated as, "If Allah wills it." It's a common Arabic/Islamic saying.