

Binary Ibadah

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“*Tu hamen seedha raasta dikha de**,” the Urdu accent gently crackled, breaking Isra’s daydream. She had lost herself in the hypnotic, dancing vortex that the distracted stirring had generated in her tea.

“Sounds like the batteries are running low, Ummi,” she said.

“I know. I scan just now to hear how slow the voice become. Very slow isn’t it?”

As Isra watched Ummi study the Quran translator device, which she held like a bingo dauber, she was struck by the farcical interaction of technology and tradition, where a man-made pen could read what was once written by a divine one.

“Yeah. *Quiet* Ummi, not slow.”

“Yes, quiet – what I mean.”

Since she’d started volunteering at the local charity shop, Ummi had begun to speak with Isra in English, in an attempt to improve her fluency.

Mother and daughter sat in silence for a moment. Their conversations had a way of flowing into dead ends following their *Al-Fatiha* teatime ritual, as a result of the moment’s serenity and routine. The first of the Quran, the Surah was ingrained in Isra’s mind just the same as every other Muslim. But, for the same reason she took a while to warm to the translator pen, and for the same reason she took a while to warm to Hamza himself, Ummi liked to read the Surah aloud from the Quran rather than reciting it from memory. She was conservative to the point of cautious, a woman of habit and tradition whose quietly precarious anxiety was shrouded in dreams of a lost home and a lost spouse.

“Hamza is a good boy, Alhamdulillah. It is so clever really. I can understand so easy.”

The mention of his name opened a door to a shaded room where spiders, that now scurried from the light, had begun to construct a playground of cobwebs. They scurried up and down Isra’s spine. She wanted to tell Ummi everything. It had been three days since Isra’s confrontation with Hamza. She had told no one the situation, instead attempting, ineffectively, to evict it from her mind. She recalled the gradual battle to win Ummi’s blessing and cursed herself for not trusting the magic of a mother’s intuition. Ummi felt Hamza’s free-spirited, liberal demeanour to be glib following their first few interactions – from his disarmingly overt eye-contact to his and his parents’ lack of an offer to remove their shoes. A memory from months ago played in Isra’s mind – the first signs of a tendency to abstraction that had gone from an idiosyncrasy, to a habit, to an all-consuming addiction that had swallowed her fiancé whole.

*Guide us to the straight path

Isra's enthusiastic response to the prototype Quran translation pen had been multiplied in Hamza's radiant smile as they sat together on the park bench.

"I'm so glad you like it, I was so worried," Hamza said.

Hamza explained that Iqbal, whose WhatsApp stream of Quran quotes throughout Hamza's depression had instigated his spiritual shift, had disapproved of the pen-translator: *"Brother, I'm not so sure about this. You're essentially trying to make a business out of turning the holy book into ones and zeroes, astagfirullah."*

"But Isra, sometimes I think that's all part of Him," Hamza mused. "Sometimes I think that there are streams of ones and zeroes in our prayers, in our memories, in our dreams."

The extent of his devotion to that philosophy had been revealed to Isra in the past month, as Hamza became increasingly consumed by his next project. *"Quranic AI platform"* he would say dismissively whenever Isra would ask what exactly he was working on. He'd begun to exhibit a dissociative psychosis, constantly secretive and often frenzied or preoccupied. It had disturbed Isra, and to make sense of his delirium, she'd searched his moleskin notebook when she'd last seen him. What she found made her skin crawl:

Imagine if you could ask Alexa for higher guidance. Take the best of Quranic teaching, humanise it, modernise it. Deep learning will decode and rebuild the text, extending the divine poetry to answer today's questions.

The Holy Quran, written by Allah, The Most Exalted, edited by Hamza Abdolah.

"Is this pen with Wee-Fee?" Ummi asked.

It dawned on Isra that, for her mother, learning of Hamza's new venture would not only rattle her modest heart with grief. It would enact a twisted kidnapping. Her faith, the thing she held dearest, was to be taken from her lap, tainted, and displayed in a medium alien and incomprehensible to her. How would Isra even begin explaining a Quranic artificial intelligence to someone who pronounced Wi-Fi as "Wee-Fee"? She wouldn't.

"No Ummi, it doesn't need Wi-Fi."

Still, invariably, she would have to tell Ummi that the engagement was off.

"Ummi, can I ask you something?" Isra said.

"Yes, baita."

She felt an impending guilt, a sensation she had come to associate with home since she had moved out and discovered an identity that felt half-way autonomous. Coming back

reminded her of all the ways she was betraying the narrow but surely righteous jurisdiction of her traditional upbringing.

“Kya hai baita?” Ummi asked, laying a hand on Isra’s knee and offering a smile. “Is everything okay?”

Ummi’s innocent eyes were beacons, a promise that everything would be fine and what was not fine their lightkeeper would make so. Isra couldn’t bring herself to defy that rule.

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

Ummi nodded, before returning to the Quran. She opened it at her bookmark and read the Arabic in her soothing cadence.

After a moment, she said, “I do translation in English so you can understand easy.”

She carefully adjusting the pen’s language setting before tapping it on the QR code corresponding to the verse she had just read. The pen spoke.

“And the word of your Lord has been fulfilled in truth and in justice. None can alter His words, and He is the Hearing, the Knowing.”

The words inked into Isra like an ice injection. She stood, unbalanced. Her mouth dried and her unfed stomach churned.

“Isra!”

“I’m fine. I just... need to go,” Isra tremored.

Ummi stood suddenly and made a vague grasp to stabilise Isra, who leaned through the air. She gagged. Then she ran to the bathroom and vomited out the irreverence Hamza had tried to feed her, that her body had rejected.

Isra’s hands cramped, sweat pooling between her fingers as she gripped the steering wheel. She pressed her back against the driver’s seat to prevent herself from curling into a foetal position. As she sped down the road, her torso became a cavity, a gymnasium where dismay pirouetted and pranced. She repeated to herself the sensible, measured justifications she chose to adorn last night’s frantic phone call with, like her flatmate Kate hanging perfect, plastic ornaments to her untrimmed tree last Christmas.

Despite the distress with which she had explained the situation to him, and the passion that resonated in his disapproving, Isra never thought that Iqbal would do something like this. She recalled moments of their conversation where her words might have been lost in translation... or exaggerated.

“He’s lost his mind. He’s probably even writing Surahs,” she had told him.

“Astagfirullah. He has strayed far from the straight path. You did the right thing by telling me. I will show him the light.”

The certainty and assurance in Iqbal’s replies had been a medicine for Isra’s throbbing conscience. But had she overlooked a threatening coldness in the finality of his tone? Had she fed it further with her selfish support for his promise of action, that had absolved her of responsibility?

“Please, whatever needs to be done.”

Whatever needs to be done. The words inundated the car’s interior, like an overpowering air freshener. Isra turned the radio on at full blast to drown them out but they didn’t budge. She opened the windows, but still, her words multiplied faster than they dispersed. *Whatever needs to be done. Whatever needs to be done. Whatever needs to be done.* They formed a film on the windscreen that obscured her view. She put her wipers on at top speed, to no effect. Careening past a group of pedestrians, she practically drifted into the hospital car park.

At the reception, she repeated the room number that she had been instructed to ask for when the hospital had contacted her twenty minutes earlier.

“He’s in a stable state,” the nurse assured her.

The first thing she saw as she entered the room, was Hamza’s smile. She saw it before she saw the hideous, patterned hospital gown that he wore, the grey tubes that tentacled from him decorating the avant-garde ensemble. Before she heard the band of blinking, beeping monitors, their boxy heads on bodies that were all neck like American style mailboxes. Before she smelt the disinfected air, heavy with professional discretion. She was filled with guilt.

“Isra, you’re here,” he said in a morphine-induced slur.

“Of course I’m here.”

For a moment, there was nothing to say.

“How are you feeling?” Isra asked.

“Really...okay. Everything’s good.”

Isra sat next to him on the bed. Tears teemed rapidly in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Hamza. I’m so sorry.”

He squeezed her hand.

“Hey, it’s okay. Honestly Isra, it’s okay.”

His misplaced solicitude only made the tears fall faster.

“There’s something that you need to know,” Isra started, her voice shaking and splintering. “I spoke to Iqbal last night. I honestly never thought he would do something like this. But I spoke to him.”

Hamza’s expression creased into a confused scowl.

“Something like what?”

Isra hesitated. She had reasoned that the morphine’s numbing effect would make the deep incision of truth less painful for the both of them, but perhaps she should have waited before telling him.

“The stabbing. I told him about the AI last night.”

Hamza straightened, “Isra, the stabbing was completely random. I went out for some fresh air at about four and a couple of yobs hanging around near my apartment mistook me for someone else.”

Isra froze, recalibrating herself.

“Why did you tell Iqbal about the AI?” Hamza pressed.

“He’s known you longer than I have. He’s well-versed. He’s the one who introduced you to Islam in the first place,” she recited, putting her revision to use. “I thought he would be able to talk you around.”

Hamza deflated.

“So, you didn’t have a change of heart about it?” he said. “I thought that’s why you’re here.”

“I’m here because you’ve been stabbed.”

“And why do you think I have been stabbed?”

Isra’s brows twisted into a flummoxed tick.

“You just said, mistaken identity, right?” she asked.

“Sure,” Hamza replied. “But Allah does not mistake identities does He. You said it yourself. People will make *death threats*.”

“I don’t understand, Hamza.”

“This is just practice. He needs to see that I am determined enough to complete His will. Like Ibrahim sacrificed Ishmael, I will sacrifice myself for His message.”

A resolute wrinkle in the back on Isra’s mind finally smoothed out. Whenever Umami had retold the story of Prophet Ibrahim and his son Ishmael, she’d repeated a doctrine. Her words, at the time insignificant to Isra, were now laden with guidance as she recalled them. *Remember Isra*, she would say in her poetic Urdu, *when Ibrahim was first sent the revelation*

to sacrifice his son, he thought it was the devil playing a trick on him. Sometimes in life, sin might become insidious, wearing a disguise of righteousness. All we can do in these moments, is step away.

“No Hamza,” Isra replied. “You will sacrifice *His message* for yourself.”

She was suddenly unphased by Hamza, indifferent. His blasphemous words struck her as juvenile – a fetishization of spirituality and a flippancy for sacrament. A numinous devotion filled Isra. She understood, without question, that its profundity lay inconceivable to artificial editing. She rose from the false prophet’s bed and left the room.