

Peace Be with You, Sister

Chris de Stoop

An extract

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Translator Sam Garret

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The room buzzed with misery and affliction: the women’s stories always began with a deep sigh and ended with a resigned “*Inshalla*”. They spoke of all manner of complaints such as back pain and headaches and stress and tightness of the chest. About unhealthy bowel movements, stiffness of the hands or sores on the skin. Or about nervous illness and insomnia, because their husband had stopped talking to them, because their sons roamed the streets, while they themselves never left the house or knew no one or didn’t speak the language. Or were homesick.

Most of Muriel’s patients called her by her Islamic name, Maryam. She listened to them devotedly. She asked a number of specific questions: age, nutrition, earlier illnesses, medication, pain? Before starting the treatment, she pronounced the *bismillah*: “In the name of Allah, the Merciful, full of Grace.”

She placed two or four glass cups on their backs or shoulder blades. The cups had a rubber suction device attached to them with which she could pump out all the air. The vacuum affixed the cups to the skin. She continued pumping until the skin became engorged with blood. Then she removed the cup. She ran a razor blade over the skin and replaced the cups. She watched attentively as the flesh parted and the dark-red blood began to flow. The impure blood.

Rebecca was deeply impressed by this unique woman, who radiated such confidence and friendliness. A rather handsome woman, in the prime of her life, with a pretty oval face and brown, wavy hair that stuck out from beneath her headscarf. She had dark, almond-shaped eyes, full lips, a firm nose with a slight bend to it, and full eyebrows that she did not pluck. Without a trace of makeup.

Her home, in a dismal neighborhood between Brussels’ southern railway station and the tram garages, always smelled delightfully of fresh-baked bread or baklava. Downstairs was a bakery – patisserie, the back door of which gave onto a stairwell decorated with Oriental tiles. What struck Rebecca even more was the Muriel’s flat had two separate doors. She had entered by the women’s door, her fiancée Pascal by the men’s.

The flat itself was strikingly sober. Muriel ate and slept on the floor, just as the Prophet had. There was almost no furniture. Only a folding chair with the Koran on it. And shelves full of books in Arabic and French.

Scattered around the floor were black, hand-embroidered cushions. On the walls were photographs of the Ka'aba in Mecca and calligraphies of Islamic proverbs. The musky incense burning on a plate served to keep evil spirits at bay.

After the treatment the patients left the room, relieved and relaxed. The ugly red spots on their backs, they knew, would go away by themselves after a few days, especially if they used the salve made from black cumin and pure honey that Muriel sometimes handed out. Almost all of them said they felt lighter, like a bird that has been released from its cage and allowed to fly. Whatever it was they were suffering from, something was being done about it now. And what Muriel did was a continuation of what the Elders had done in a distant past. Her work was based solely on the Koran and the words of the Prophet, and all of the directives found there concerning physical and spiritual wellbeing. What they called "prophetic medicine", and more specifically *hiyama*: Islamic bloodletting.

- It's not me who heals, it is God, Muriel always said dutifully. What happens to the patient is Allah's will. I am merely his instrument.

After the session she was busy for a long time, boiling and sterilizing the instruments. Then she poured them both a cup of hot, sweet tea with cardamom. Rebecca was barely eighteen. Long ago, as refugees from Sierra Leone, she and her mother had ended up in the suburban town of Sint-Joost-ten-Node. She had been raised as a Christian, but was thinking about converting to Islam. That desire had grown gradually in the course of her relationship with Pascal.

- My conversion was the best thing that ever happened to me, Muriel said. I used to be on the wrong track. I didn't go to classes and I drank alcohol and took drugs. I worked at a bakery and stole money from the cash register when I needed it. I had a terrible partner who beat me.
- And after that? asked Rebecca, who always had to search for words. She spoke Dutch and Muriel spoke French, which sometimes made conversation difficult.
- After that, Islam gave my life a goal and structure. Islam and Issam...

She seemed completely happy with her husband. Her Issam could build cupboards, sew clothes, recite verses from the Koran by heart, extract blood, drive out demons and lift barbells like no other man in this grimy neighborhood. These days, though, he kept his trousers on when he lifted weights. No more strutting around on stage in that ridiculously tiny string that showed his buttocks, the way he had when he became Belgian bodybuilding champion in the 75-kilo category. He had left all that behind, partly at Muriel's insistence.

Rebecca had caught a glimpse of Issam when she came through the door. A short, stocky man with a long, reddish beard, dyed with henna the way the Prophet did, and a squarish torso wrapped in thick cables of muscle. Over his impressive body he wore a white tunic that hung almost to his ankles, wrinkled as the nightdress worn by someone who had just climbed out of bed after a night of fitful sleep.

As the bells of the nearby Sint-Antonius Church sounded, Muriel said she dreamed of someday moving away, to an Islamic country where she could wake up to the muezzin's cry. She felt looked down upon in Belgium, where every man with a beard and every woman with a headscarf was seen as suspicious. And where policemen could come barging into your apartment and flip through your

religious books with their heathen hands. Before you knew it, you might even see yourself on the evening news as part of a 'dormant cell' of Al-Qaida.

Muriel was also infuriated by the recent French ban on headscarves at schools and public institutions. Protests and demonstrations against the measure had been held by Muslim women around the world, but it was wasted effort. Her veil was her personal identity and a form of devotion, Muriel thought. But when the Belgians saw a woman wearing a *nikaab*, they almost threw a connotation fit.

What Muriel would really like to do, in other words, was move away and start all over again. That wasn't such a problem, she added, for a woman without children. From the look on her face Rebecca could tell that this was the secret she carried in her heart. The timbre of her voice said that this was something unspoken, and that it should remain so. It lay deep inside her. In the darkness between her ovaries.

A Woman's Treasures

It was the spring of 2004. The sun broke benevolently through the clouds and the first tables and chairs appeared on the square in front of the Sint-Antonius. Old Turks dragged their easy chairs outside and smoked water pipes. The sounds from the street rose to Muriel's balcony on the fourth floor. Downstairs, beside the busy bakery, was a newsstand. Beside that a coffee house frequented by noisy young people from morning to night. There was also a snack bar selling Moroccan specialties. And, across the street, beside the red brick church, Het Paradijs Café.

Through the rusty bars on the balcony of Muriel's flat one looked out over one of the poorest districts in Brussels. Many of the houses sported satellite dishes. Muriel went out on the street as little as possible. She took cover more and more against the outside world. She entrenched herself in her study of Islam. Her faith became everything to her. Unlike other Muslim women, it was not enough for her to merely perform the *salat* and the *wadu*, the five daily prayers and the ritual cleansing. In these times, when it was so urgent to stand up for one's faith, it would have been improper to waste one's hours on fun and pleasure.

Her profession was 'student' and her passion 'reading', that was what she had written on the questionnaire from the school on Grenstraat in Sint-Joost-ten-Node. The new center that had opened recently there was staunchly Islamic. On the outside one saw only a garage door with a sign on it. The center offered courses in Arabic and Islam, there was a publishing house for religious books and a library with reference works and computers. Muriel, who attended Arabic lessons each Monday and Tuesday, sometimes stayed for hours afterwards to study. During the last few weeks, for example, she had downloaded texts about the "aromatic herbs of Morocco" and "the treatment of migraines" from the website *islamonline*. Her migraines were bothering her more all the time.

Muriel, who had dropped out of secondary school at sixteen, now excelled in classical Arabic. Vocabulary lists, pronunciation and conversation, text analysis; she was a good learner. She received the highest marks for almost all her homework. She was the best student in the class. Almost all of the homework assignments were taken from the Koran and other religious works. It was striking to see that Muriel, in all her assignments, not only effaced the portrayals of people's

faces, but also of donkeys, mice and sheep. With white correction fluid or a black marker. Portrayals of creatures with a soul, after all, were forbidden by strict Islamic interpretation.

At home she spent almost all her free time studying. She cared for her large collection of books with the dedication of an old gardener tending to his roses. Muriel used those books to write her dialectical syntheses and analyses. To perform exegetics in her own searching, groping fashion. She had already filled thousands of pages with writing, all neatly perforated and arranged in ring binders. From right to left, as one did in Arabic. In a strong, rolling hand, as befit her personality. And each page redolent with musk or the scent of other kinds of incense.

In an exhaustive treatise on *The Woman and Her Clothing*, for example, Muriel noted that the mediaeval scholar Ibn Taymiyyah had said that when a Muslim woman went outside she should always wear a robe that covered her completely. Sheik Ibn Taymiyyah had been one of the leading lights of salafist Islam. He also said that women should not wear perfume when they went to the mosque. That, however, was not entirely consistent, Muriel noted: "These days one adorns one's self to go out, but wears everyday clothes when one visits Allah."

According to her, it was actually a good thing to pretty one's self up for Allah, the way you did for your own husband. For the rest, however, you had to do everything in your power to conceal the "woman's treasures", such as hair and breasts. That, after all, was what the Koran commanded: "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty... that they should draw their veils over their bosoms."

According to reliable tradition, the Prophet, peace be with him, had then added: "Among the people of Hell are women who, though clothed, still walk naked and shake their hips. They wear on their head knots of hair that look like a camel's hump." A woman, therefore, could also tempt men with clothing that was too tight, with the way she walked or wore her hair, and all of that was forbidden.

Men, too, were to wear wide tunics, but those were to reach no further than halfway to their calves, for the Prophet had said: "That part of the clothing below the ankles is doomed to Hell." Her husband, Issam, for example rode his carrier cycle down the streets of the European capital dressed like an Afghan. His pure white djellaba flapped in the wind, and beneath it he wore a pair of flannel trousers to protect him against the Belgian cold. And on his head he wore a prayer cap.

He had no car and did everything by bicycle. With powerful, bare calves.

Together with Muriel, he sewed those long, devout robes himself. They had two large sewing machines in the apartment and sometimes worked for a fabric shop near the northern railway station. Without making much of a profit.

The scholars were not in complete agreement on this, but Muriel felt that the hands and face were among the treasures which a woman should conceal. When she went out on the street, therefore, she wore black gloves and a black *nikaab* that showed only her eyes. And she had taught herself to avert those eyes chastely, for even a glance could set a man on fire. A woman's gaze was a poisoned arrow from Iblis, the devil, she wrote.

In this clothing, concealed from human eyes, Muriel felt protected and embraced by the *ummah*, the Muslim community of believers. Despite the fact that her views were shared only by a small minority of that community. She was, to be more precise, almost the only woman in her

neighborhood who went veiled from head to toe. But she felt better that way, better than she had in her old jeans jacket and miniskirt.

After a while, in fact, you didn't even notice that everyone was staring at you.

Domiciliary search, 2 April, 2004

Police report

We, Anzalone, Giovanni, police inspector of Brussels Southern Zone, narcotics section, hereby report to your office concerning the following. On 2 April, 2004 our services provided support for a domiciliary search of Merodestraat 275, as part of an investigation into a reported theft at Ninove. Our support was requested because the building in question is located in the middle of a "troublesome" neighborhood, the Sint-Antonius district.

We forced our way into the building and proceeded with federal colleagues to the apartment on the top floor. There we were met by a male individual of North African appearance, whose most striking physical characteristics were a particularly luxuriant beard and an extremely athletic physique. At the rear of the apartment we observed a prostrate individual (gender impossible to determine, - ed.) covered in a burka that concealed all parts of the body. Our colleagues request admittance to the apartment, but the male individual requests a moment's respite in order, he explains, to bring his female companion to the kitchen. The colleagues agree to this.

Access to the main room of the apartment is granted and the search can begin. We note the presence of many publications in Arabic (a language we do understand - ed.), as well as many books dealing with the Koran. In the apartment, a space has been furnished for the purposes of prayer. The individual tells us that he is a former boxer, the reason for his muscular physique. He hands over his identity card, as well as that of his female companion. These refer to the aforementioned degaque, Muriel and goris, Issam. At no point during our search is the female companion present in the same room with us. We may conclude that both individuals display all signs of being ultra-religious persons.

The domiciliary search proves fruitless, in the absence of any infringement or suspect elements. One may conclude that the two individuals have nothing to do with the case for which the search warrant was issued.

In witness whereof.