MYM LITERATURE

From My Plea to the Prayer Rug

by Umbar Nadeem

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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Content Note: domestic violence.

Prelude

"I love the righteous, although I'm not of them."

Imam Al-Shāfiʿī

Is there still hope for me? From dust, I was brought into the world. And to dust I shall return. Yet I wonder, have I spent these years well? Have I served my lord well?

Dear Allah, is there still hope for me?

A Stranger with a Desperate Plea

I've been a stranger all my life—to the world, to friends, family, even to faith. I didn't know much about Allah ﷻ growing up; in fact, I used to question whether or not He was even real. For so many years, one could say I lived blindly, with a clueless mind and a confused heart, and I worried my shortcomings barred me from getting close to the lord.

You know, I always thought praying required perfection, a pure state, and a clean history. That if a Muslim had made too many

mistakes, had slipped up one too many times, their prayer was next to useless, null, and void. How many times can a person sin, I wonder?

This narrow mindset stayed with me until one night, I found myself trying to control my tears as I made my way to make wuḍū. I remember this night vividly.

It was 3 am and for several months prior, I had been deep in the pits of the worst depression of my life, and hadn't even realized my life was slowly withering away. All these teenage years lost to a mental health battle I didn't even know I was fighting. So many sleepless nights, constant pent-up emotional breakdowns, thoughts that felt much too heavy. I had finally reached my breaking point.

And I just couldn't take it anymore.

Here I was, in the middle of the night, feeling an inclination to make prayer for God knows what. As I walked to the bathroom with a heavy heart, I suddenly paused in my tracks. A part of me thought it was foolish for me to pray. I hadn't been very mindful of Allah ﷻ and only He knew how much I was drowning in my own faults. But perhaps that was exactly why I needed to speak to Him. I had made up my mind—I was really going to do this. *Tahajjud*, a prayer I hadn't made in what felt like forever. What I was planning to even make *tahajjud* for, I didn't really know. All I knew was that I needed presence, I needed guidance, even if my soul still felt like it was not welcome.

And so I made my *wuḍū*. I tried to silence my doubtful thoughts as much as possible, focusing on the fresh cold water as it made contact with my skin. First, the hands, then gradually moving to the face, then along the forearms. I had always been fascinated by how much the body can remember in times like these, having each step ingrained in the mind. Even now, as I look back and reflect on this moment, it was rather comforting to know I hadn't completely

forgotten my ablution.

As I soaked up the refreshing feel on my skin and body, I suddenly had a thirst I didn't even realize was there. But indeed it was. A thirst for a safe space and what could have been safer than in the presence of the Almighty? *I need this*, I had thought to myself, taking note of my blotchy eyes and puffy face. It was time.

I had not expected anything to come out of that fateful night. But when my hands and knees hit that prayer mat and I found myself in sujood longer than intended, my soul suddenly felt like it was taking its first breath.

And as I came back up from prostration, I softly exhaled, my eyes brimming with tears once more.

I had never truly cried in salah before. Even when my family was silently enduring abuse at the hands of my father; even when I was diagnosed with an incurable chronic illness; even when we were financially broken. Even then, I never really cried to Allah ﷻ.

But there I was. I actually felt myself crying. It was such a quiet and miniscule sob, one would have missed it completely. Yet I know Allah ﷻ was my witness.

Like all things decreed, I think it was Allah ﷻ Himself calling me to Him. And with a desperate plea, I answered.

Little did I know what this prayer would do for me in years to come. It was a small step towards a process of healing I so badly needed.

Back to the Roots

But before I could ever start to heal and become the Muslim I am now, I had to relearn my own traumas. As a child growing up in a difficult home, I had so many questions about who I was, who I was

meant to be. Mama enforced rules from the get-go: no tight clothes, no sleeveless tops, no leaving the house without a modest covering. Of course, I always knew she was just protecting me, even if these rules seemed strict at the time. But it felt odd being told at eight years old that I needed to cover my body. I remember getting lectured by mama from time to time as a kid if my shirts weren't long enough or if there was too much skin showing in front of the men of the house. I never really understood why but I'd stop wearing such clothes anyway. There was a constant sense of shame surrounding the way I looked and this hair that needed to be covered with a piece of fabric. Ultimately, I never fully committed to this modesty until my first year of high school, where I finally decided to try it out.

Go for it, I thought as I was getting ready for school. *It's just a piece of cloth anyway.*

I remember walking into the first period with my scarf loosely on my head—at that time, I didn't even know how to secure it properly. And suddenly, people looked at me with a different look in their eyes.

I asked my friends what they thought of this new step and I was hit back with, *"I think I liked you better without it."*

Yes, of course. Of course you do.

Those teenage years felt like a nightmare. While I felt myself drifting from everyone I once knew and loved, I became more and more wary of what the Lord was trying to teach me. And sometimes I wonder if this is where my fear of God began. I constantly felt ashamed of my appearance and questioned why we even needed to wear the hijab. I walked around with my head hung low, my loneliness becoming a cripple. Would things have been different had I been taught Islam in a softer way? If, instead of constant policing and scrutiny, I could have learned more about the beauty of modesty and why Allah commands what He does? Perhaps then, if only then, if I

had understood who we really wear this hijab for, I wouldn't have felt as lonely. Perhaps if I had been taught to pray before I was taught to cover, this wouldn't have felt so alien.

I still can't get the rotten sense of shame out of my mind, a feeling I am much too familiar with. I always felt it when I looked at my prepubescent body, and I feel it now, even as I look at myself in the mirror, at the age of 22, wrapping my hijab as part of my routine.

And as much as this shame stays with me, so does the religious fear and guilt. For a long time, I believed Allah ﷻ resented me and had no place for me within His love. I often felt like a purposeless piece of flesh, watching other Muslims be so secure and confident in who they were. I would always come back to the same questions:

Why does it have to be so hard for me?

What am I doing wrong?

How come their hijab suits them so well while I'm still trying to figure out how to keep this thing in place?

It was simply and utterly frustrating. I found myself trying to fit into a mold that everyone else seemed to fit into. But it wasn't working. I could tell the shame was taking over me, consuming my every thought, my every emotion. And I began to notice how it seeped through innocent conversation with peers and strangers alike. Every time I laughed a little too loud, I'd kick myself later for doing so. Every time I smiled too big, I'd feel disgusted imagining how I must have looked. Every time someone tried to meet my gaze, I'd instantly lower my eyes and feel a burning sensation in my throat, afraid they would see too much. Hoping that if I stared at the floor, at the wall, anywhere else—they would finally walk away and let me be.

God, I never really knew how exhausting it could be to live like this.

Learning Du'a

With this religious fear, comes a sense of responsibility. Despite being told about modesty, I still struggled with understanding salah and how it worked, until one day, my mama began to teach me the basics. At that time, I didn't even know what *tahajjud* was, but I'd watch my mama pray her five daily prayers, like an animal entranced by the smell of its next meal. I'd curiously observe her motions and try to copy each move. I was in awe of how she knew what to do each time, how she held her hands up to her Lord, eyes closed and mouth softly uttering words I could never make out. Later, I'd find out she was making du'a. She did this not only after she prayed, but multiple times throughout the day, and sometimes even from the comfort of her bed.

One day I asked her what she asked for in du'a. "How do you know what to say, Mama? How do you know He's listening to your prayers?"

My mama simply looked at me smiling, and replied, "Allah hears and knows everything, beta. Try it one time, you'll see."

I started trying to make du'a every now and then, unsure whether or not my words even made sense. Sometimes, I didn't even know what to say, and would sit there dumbfounded, my hands raised and my heart heavy. Yet I like to believe Allah understood me anyway, even in these moments of silence.

It's funny how the child grows and develops. They watch their parents and mimic their actions, wanting nothing more than to be like them. This was how I felt when I prayed with my father for the very first time before he left our home, now a distant stranger. I was seven years old with a vision and a dream: to be like Baba. Even despite witnessing his violent anger and abusive nature, ten-year-old me admired him when he prayed, tall in stature, eyes on the ground, shoulders firm, calloused hands ripened with age. This is the father I

remember. This is the Islam I remember. And we'd finish the last rakat, his gentle smile and hand on my head, telling me I did well.

Perhaps that was all I needed from my parents. To be told I was doing well.

Trying to Find My Place in Community

I would go to my local masjid for weekly Quran classes and to attend Friday prayers. Even when I didn't understand the words I was reciting, I felt a lightness in my heart when I had the Quran placed in front of me. And as I recited, it was as if my soul already knew all the lines, memorized them to a crisp. My voice would come out like butter; it felt like I had done this in a past life. And as I finished reciting a surah, I'd look over to meet eyes with my teacher, who'd beam at me, a tenderness in her gaze. She always told me my voice was meant for the Quran. That I could touch souls as long as I kept reciting the beautiful words of our Lord.

I don't know whether or not I was aware of how much of a presence Islam had in my life, even back then as a little girl. But I remember how much joy I felt when I went to the masjid and saw my friends. The times I prayed side-to-side with different women, all coming from different backgrounds, with different stories. All the energy I put into learning and memorizing surahs of the Qur'an. It was instilled in me, that this was the way I wanted my life to be, that as long as my hands and knees were on the prayer mat and as long as I kept remembrance of Allah in my heart, I could navigate life to any capacity.

But as I grew older, something in the air had undoubtedly shifted. I started noticing the changed dynamics and how society became more harsh. Our parents became paranoid of everyone's opinions and the

infamous saying muddled our home, *"Log kya kahenge?"* (*What will people say?*).

Before I started covering more, I noticed how the aunties looked at me. There were whispers here and there and judging eyes in every direction. I remember distinctively there was once a contest in our masjid for the 'best' student—meaning the young Muslimah who had the best attendance record at Quran classes, who memorized a commendable amount of surahs, et cetera et cetera. It was harmless, an innocent way to encourage young girls at that time to become more devoted and connected to Islam. And suddenly, I heard my name being announced. I had received a certificate in acknowledgement for my efforts, and while I smiled at this news, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of pain when I overheard the aunties behind me talking in what they must have thought were hushed tones.

"How did she win? I thought she still didn't wear the hijab..."

"My daughter goes to the same school as her and she can attest to that!"

"I don't understand these ridiculous contests if such students can't even cover their hair."

I was shocked. I didn't know what to say. I looked behind me, meeting the gaze of one of the aunties, so fierce and stern, it made me heat up. She peered at me over her large-rimmed glasses, studying me like I was a competitor even though I could have been the same age as her own child. And despite finding their comments offensive and hurtful, I started to agree with them more and more. Perhaps there was no chance for me to be a truly good Muslim if I couldn't even commit to one of Allah's biggest commandments.

But looking back at this moment now, I wonder what would make a person say such things? I was still so young and unaware and was still figuring out my own Muslim identity, yet couldn't even be respected

because I didn't wear the hijab yet. It was strange and painful all the same. Every time I reached for the hijab, the thought stayed in the back of my mind: *Am I really worthy of wearing this?* Even when I had eventually put it on later in high school, I still didn't feel fully worthy nor ready. My own friends stopped hanging out with me. They weren't Muslim themselves, so it only made sense they would find it hard to understand, yet something small in me still wished they could have been proud of me, or at the very least, showed me some reassurance that they still wanted to be my friend. But in hindsight, they never did, and those friendships became history, another thing that faded away with time.

And as much as all of these experiences hurt me, I wonder now if they were all meant to shape me into who I am today. If the hijab hadn't been there for me, perhaps I still would have stayed in toxic places and harmful company. With this perspective, my pain eases a little more.

A Yearning to Keep Going

Even now as I try to unpack my religious trauma, I still yearn to be better. I've always admired the righteous even if I am not as devout as them. And as much as I know that Allah ﷻ loves me, I still struggle with the feeling of being an outsider to my own religion. I look at the mirror and often wonder if people can see what I hide. A deep and sorrowful part of me longs for belonging more than anything, yet I'm afraid that my lack of knowledge and understanding makes me less of a Muslim.

But perhaps what I've failed to recognize in all these moments of sorrow, is that Allah's mercy never left. His *hidaya* had been upon me even when I felt like dying would be better. In my loneliest and most

depressive moments, I still somehow found my mind drifting back to Him. His presence never left. Isn't that beautiful?

I realize now, after everything, after each and every trial, this yearning to strive to be better will only strengthen. If I find myself returning to Him, then indeed there is still hope for me. If this is not a reflection of His mercy, then what else could it be?

And with that, I will continue to find my way home in the shade of Allah ﷻ, where my soul feels taken care of and my tired limbs can rest. Indeed, this fickle little heart we call our *qalb*—it will continue to make its way to the prayer rug.