

MYM LITERATURE



The Price of Doing What's Right

by Nada Ahmedin

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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17/7/2028 17:54 – National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes (NCAVC), Conference Room

This glass skin of mine shatters and distorts beneath the scrutinizing gaze of my audience. I sit there, frozen, uncomfortable and dissociated. They watch my every move, like a rat in a maze; every twitch of my eyes, every hesitant turn, observed and judged. And I'm left to wonder if there is any hope at all. I swore this time I would break free, but here I am, stagnant, proving to myself that habits don't break after a desperate cry for help. That a man's words in the darkest period of his life don't change anything. How he will forget you, just like it was always meant to be.

A historian once shared a profound truth: details of legendary discoveries were often lost in the mundane. How exactly, 45 letters after his cousin's, did the king decide enough is enough, only to declare war again and ruin his entire country and reputation? How did the not-so-silent cat of the next-door serial killer inadvertently lead the police to its owner's grim secrets?

How did I write 99 and a half journal entries, each dated for a future I pray to see beyond the walls of this mental asylum?

I'm left frozen in the cold block of this white room suffocating me. I send a silent prayer that its oppressive weight smothers the adults in their doctor costumes. That they, too, feel as uneasy as I do.

“Miss Anna, please write your full name and sign here.”

I grip the pen like it's the final puzzle piece of my not-so-mundane life and sign a signature I make up on the spot. How could they know what's real and what's not? All I have to do is keep up this act until the end. My final act won't be inside these cursed walls.

A bitter smile tugs at my lips, threatening to betray what I really feel.

“When will I be discharged, doctor?”

The word sits like bile on my tongue. I could be his senior, or his senior's senior. Yet here I am, forced to call him “doctor.”

He purses his lips and squints, his demeanour reeking of distrust and arrogance, a dangerous mixture for a man who claims he's here to help.

“We still need some more time.”

I squint back, challenging what's left of his borrowed authority. “I don't have time, young man. Nor do I have the patience to let the government treat me like some kind of lab rat.”

My eyes scan the room. No visible exits. A nurse at every corner. You'd think I held the secrets of the universe with how tightly they're guarding this cage. I feel like an animal at the zoo—used, displayed, no longer trusted to function outside my box.

Except I'm not a wild animal that needs to be tamed, just an influential doctor who dared to speak the truth.

“Of course, Miss Anna. We wouldn't want to make you feel uncomfortable. All of these procedures are entirely consensual and for the good of our nation. It's both an honor for me and my team to work alongside incredible geniuses like yourself.”

I let out a breathless laugh. He refuses to call me by my hard-earned title, yet still expects me to believe he sees me as anything other than a burden. One he most definitely wishes to eliminate at the

earliest convenience.

“It’s Doctor Anna,” my voice is flat. I’m not going to give him the reaction he wants. “Your so-called ‘honour to work alongside me’ doesn’t make sense when you can’t even address me by my proper academic title.”

They are not even hiding it anymore. I truly expected better from the so-called “top tier psychology researchers” that the government needs me to work with so badly. If I could even call this “work” and not a social experiment that feels more like a trap.

His tight smile falters, then stretches even further. A thin, brittle line. I wouldn’t have known he was fazed if it hadn’t been for the pulsed vein on the side of his neck.

I must have hit a nerve. Good. This is payback for how they threw me into this three-day mess of interrogations. I’m stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no phone or smart gadgets to communicate with the outside world. The poor book talk and signing event coordinator must be in shambles.

I still remember poor sweet Jamila’s brown eyes widening with shock when the group of strong men in suits grabbed me after the event, in order to “chat” about how my book, *The Psychology of Dictators*, drew the attention of the government. How could it not? At least 10 major protests were ignited within the first month of its release and hundreds of thousands flooded the streets to rise up against our dictator. That kind of unity was only seen back in the 1900s, when our country gained its independence.

I should have run away when I had the chance. But this “doctor” wasn’t going to let me go that easily, I had little option but to comply. *He wouldn’t be heartless enough to kill me, right? If he did, he could have done it a long time ago.*

My gaze searches the room, looking for anything warmer than the

ice cold energy I feel from the fake smiles and tense silence around me. Nothing here feels like the career path I fell in love with. A small nurse, one who hasn't yet uttered a single word, but has been a constant presence since I arrived at this hellhole, looks me up and down with a feeling I can't quite place. *Is it pity? Or...*

Before I can analyze her even further, the look disappears, faster than it had appeared. The door creaks open and a new face enters. Another crisp white uniform, in the sea of stiff and rigid routine. She's holding a brown envelope, one I've seen way too many times. "Standard procedure," they call it—as if anything in this place is "standard." But as she steps into the light, my breath catches in my throat, and my heart sinks to my stomach.

It is her eyes. I'll never forget those eyes.

The same brilliant, shocking brown, now drained of every shade that once made them human. The same eyes that had widened at my book signing—the very eyes I, the fool, had mistaken for horror. For solidarity. For anything real.

"Jamila?" The name crawls out of me like something I should have buried a long time ago.

She looks up. No flinch. No flicker. The warm, expressive brown of the event coordinator I remembered has been gutted and replaced with something clinical. This is something else. Something dehumanising.

"Hello, Doctor Anna," she says, her voice smooth as glass. "It's time for your interview reporting."

And in that moment, the final, horrifying piece of the puzzle clicks into place. The friendly coordinator, the convenient government interest, the perfectly timed abduction. It wasn't a coincidence. The person I had trusted, whose innocent face was my last memory of freedom, had been part of it all along. She hadn't been a witness to my

downfall. She is one of its moving pieces.

He had been planning this from the start. I should have known just how cruel he could be.

17/7/2028 21:32 – National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes (NCAVC), Residential Room

The clock is moving at a painfully slow crawl, the silence even more dreadful than the wait. My roommate is thankfully still absent, granting me a precious window to journal the remaining sanity I've been holding on to since I returned to my glass cage.

My fingers close around the only treasure I've ever possessed—the last link I have of my twin brother from that dreadful orphanage, the bittersweet ghost of his former self, when he was simply my brother and not the shadow he'd since become. It still haunts the edges of my memory—the only trauma I refuse to face. I'm supposed to wrap up the remaining interviews tomorrow and begin discussions of me being discharged from this unit.

Again.

Two days.

That's all the time I'm supposed to spend as an experienced analyst in the department for corrupt, high-profile criminals. Yet, from the moment I stepped through these doors, a pervasive, unsettling hyper-aware team has been following me. I'm certain they're not just watching the criminals.

A doctor, Doctor Layla, has been assigned as my roommate. Agreeing to pretend to be a patient in order to understand these criminals' minds should have been the first red flag, yet I feel less like I have an option and more like I'm being coerced into believing I have less control than I really do. From an early age I was really good at beating games where I was at a disadvantage; I loved proving everyone wrong. And this time, I won't be any different.