MYM LITERATURE

The Cure

by Najet Miah

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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3rd Place Winner, Creative Writing Competition, 2019 NY MSA Showdown

Editor's Note: Muslim Youth Musings had the honor and opportunity to collaborate with NY MSA Showdown for their 2019 Competition, assist in judging the Creative Writing and Spoken Word contests, and publish selected winning entries in the categories of Creative Writing, Spoken Word, Photography, and Short Film. We congratulate all of the competitors and winners on producing high-quality work that is now being shared with Muslims across the world.

The cure for the pain, is in the pain.

Rumi

I scrolled down my Instagram feed when I spotted it. It was an image of a jail cell in Rikers Island. Below was a caption that read, "Free studio apartment in a gated community with ocean views and vintage style rod-iron double doors. Excellent security and free laundry." I still laugh when I see this meme on social media because it is a funny rendering of life inside an otherwise brutal and oppressive place. At the same time, I realize the gravity of the fact that a cell was once the most transformative space for my soul. The transformation started

nearly 9 years ago. I was 16 years old, facing 25 years in prison for Attempted Murder.

Sadly, my life started spiraling downhill long before that. I was 12 when I fell knee-deep into gang life. My life was constantly at jeopardy and my freedom, compromised. Membership dictated what colors I could wear, who I could befriend, and where I could go. Sutphin boulevard, Brentwood, and Hempstead were only a few of the names that evolved semantically from just streets and spaces to danger zones to avoid. By 15, violence and deaths reached a level of normalcy for me—or maybe it didn't. I couldn't tell once alcohol and drugs had become part of my daily regimen. At the time, it seemed like the only way to spare myself from reliving the details of my days and nights during my waking hours. I was miserable to say the least. I wanted to change, but I didn't know any other way, especially one that would allow me to peacefully and safely renege on my oath with my "brothers" and "sisters." Little did I know, that a year from then, an Attempted Murder charge and a lengthy sentence was what it would take.

When I first got to Rikers Island Jail, I wanted to die. Surrounded on all sides by the East River, this island wasn't any island you could ever imagine. You could see inmates out the window, in white- and orange-striped jumpers hopping in and out of the back of trucks collecting garbage from each jail. Bound by rows and rows of barbed wires, the ten facilities on this jail were built upon 413 acres of pure landfill, and the hot August air was determined to remind the nostrils of anyone who decided to cross over the bridge onto the island of this fact. Can you imagine the repulsive task of having to eat your chili-flavored Ramen Noodles dinner while trying to fight off the stench of garbage and sewage?

Visits with our loved ones were short, but nothing was shorter

than our three-minute showers. I don't think anything could have prepared me for cold, curtain-less showers in front of strangers. It wasn't like you wanted to be in there for more than three minutes anyways since the water being pumped out of the showerhead had the tendency of turning into the color of your coffee. Now, if the water wasn't immediately turning brown, you'd definitely know you were in Rikers once the Corcraft soap started bleaching your skin over time.

The living conditions drove people insane, but for me, nothing brought on despondency quicker than reading the statements my "brothers" and "sisters" had written on me to the police. If I proceeded to trial, they would testify against me to protect themselves. I felt betrayed and abandoned. The pain of feeling robbed of my time, childhood, and freedom kept me up for a week straight.
But it was in that feeling of poverty that I realized, all I ever had was Allah. Just as I was now—companionless and propertyless—I'd be in my grave. And that realization was enough to bring me back to Allah.

Lonely, desperate, and eager for comfort in my cold cement-walled cell, I devoured the Quran, page by page, verse by verse, imagining its descriptions of Paradise, with its gardens, plants, springs, and spaces of security. I read about the pillars of Islam and the rewards for praying, fasting, or even smiling. It dawned on me that the only covenant that was worthy of honoring for a lifetime was the one with Allah, the same covenant that the progeny of Adam (peace be upon him) took at the beginning of creation (Qur'an 7:172). During the first few years of my incarceration, I found it hard to forgive myself for my past transgressions. Thinking of having my own family in the future, I could not imagine someone hurting my child the way I had hurt others. It was the application of Islam's constant reminders of mercy like "All the sons of Adam (peace be upon him) are sinners and the

best of all sinners are those that repent often," (Ibn Majah) that helped soften my heart and remember that I was more than the worst things I had ever done.

Throughout the years, I would try to get my hand on every VHS tape in the masjid of every prison that I was transferred to. I listened to dozens of Muslim speakers like Siraj Wahhaj, Bilal Philips and Hamza Yusuf and taught what I would learn to the older converts around me who were struggling to learn the basics of the deen. But by surrounding myself with the Muslims in the masajid inside, it was I who really learned the most. That camaraderie embodied Islam's definition of what real companionship: love was when you wanted for your brothers and sisters what you wanted for yourself. Love was not blindly hurting yourself and others for recognition that didn't extend past your grave.

Yet, there was so much more to learn and relearn and not enough to satisfy my deep love for Islam that was growing day by day. But growing love for Islam and understanding of my purpose did not exist without its hardships. I admit, in a maximum-security prison it was challenging to find a balance between maintaining a respectable character for survival and exercising basic Islamic virtues, like patience. At times, I found myself mentally vacillating between knocking someone out with a chair and trying to follow the example of Rasulullah's ﷺ noble character. Alhamdulilaah. At these times I found that du'a was my real weapon—no longer any knives or guns. It was by His grace, that I was not only able to avoid severely violent interactions during my 7 years, but it was also by His grace that I was able to bring some of the most unlikely people into the fold of Islam.

It has been a little over a year since my release. The streets, the people, and technology are still a lot to acclimate to, but that discomfort is microscopic to the blessing of having a new lease at life

from Allah. Honestly, I spent the better part of my formative years imagining the details of my own murder. I never imagined making it past my twenty-first birthday with the life I was living. And not having that intimacy with Allah at that time, I didn't care much either. So, there is nothing simple or small when I acknowledge that Allah saved my life and my deen. While prison was undoubtedly a difficult place to grow up, I know that remaining in the life I was in before prison would have been more difficult.

When I couldn't even love myself, He loved me enough to protectively place me in a space where I physically owned nothing, and had no choices or the "camaraderie" that I once thought I had in the streets, just to show me that my relationship with Him was the only one that I could depend on all along. That knowledge has given me an untamable confidence and motivation to succeed in all my endeavors. As I struggle daily to become a better woman and Muslimah, and a surgeon, I always remind myself that Allah will bring pain into your life, breaking all other roads, just to make it clear that the one to Him is always the most constant and reliable one. That's why, looking back at a time of punishment, all I can see is peace, recognizing that the cure for the pain, was in the pain.